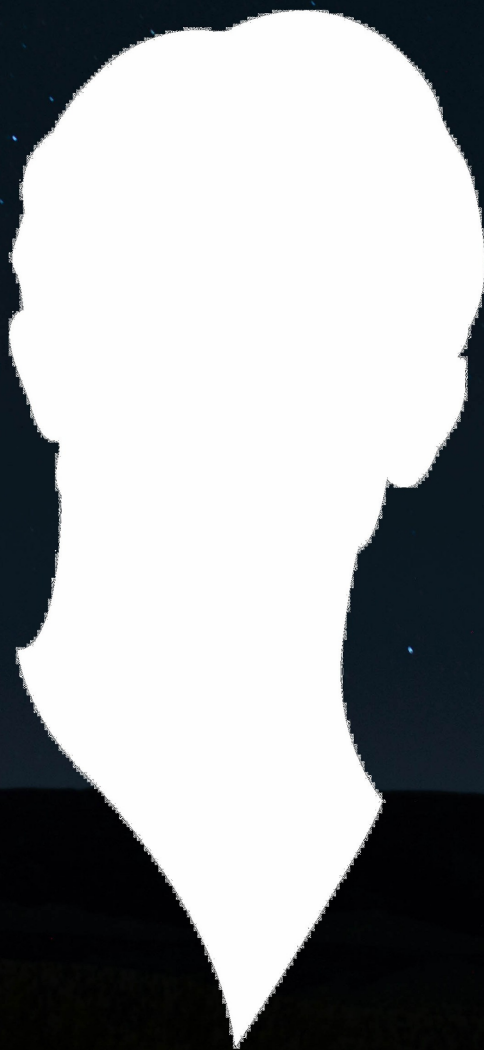


# The Winter Man



Brian E. Drake



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THE OXFORD RATIONALIST  
56 Albany Street  
Oxford, NY 13830 USA  
(607) 843-2636  
[brian.eric.drake@gmail.com](mailto:brian.eric.drake@gmail.com)

O Wind,  
If Winter comes, can Spring be far behind?  
—Percy Bysshe Shelley





## I

Around the glowing hearth on winter nights  
The young folks ask to be told once again  
The pretty tale of Dora and her love  
Who came to her from somewhere past the snows.  
They shiver and draw closer to the fire  
At each succeeding, ever sadder verse.  
The young men force a laugh, and the young women  
Will wipe away the shadow of a tear.  
The older folk, who always tell the story  
Exactly as they'd heard in their own youth,  
Now too long gone, but once more real in telling,  
Will smile at the familiar feelings raised  
And stretch their always chilled toes  
    toward the flames  
While speaking of those seasons so long past  
That they were memories of memories  
From the young days of their own parents' parents—  
Of that last, fatal winter, and the autumn  
That came before, and the preceding summer,  
The melancholy but determined spring,  
And of that bitter winter of beginnings;  
Of he who came out of the icy peaks  
In a white whirlwind of frost-biting snow,  
And finally of Dora, who quite late



One night stepped from the village church into  
A sudden trumpet blare of northern wind....

“Oh, what a gale!” young Dora cried, and laughed,  
And pulled her skirts and petticoats in place  
Out of the greedy claws of that quick gust.  
“We see your legs!” teased Martha and Betina,  
So Dora put on prim, indignant outrage.  
“You sillies, no one sees—it’s far too late.  
And if someone *does* see, well, that for him!”  
She tried to snap her fingers, but pulled on  
Her thick wool mittens at the same time. “My,  
I guess the winter’s coming!” “Winter’s here!”  
Betina cried, and pointed. “Just look—snow.”

The first flakes of the first snowfall of winter  
Were skidding on the wind around the sky  
And flickering they touched the bright red scarf  
Tied round the pretty hair on Dora’s head  
As if they daringly dashed in to kiss  
And run away again like bashful boys.

“It’s sure to be the coldest winter ever,”  
Said Martha. Plump Betina said, “My father,  
He tells me from the thickness of the wool  
On our sheep, and the way the geese came early,  
We won’t see winter gone until May’s end.”  
“No!” shrieked the girls. “Nor maybe even June!”  
They stepped out from the porch into the street.  
“I don’t know how I’ll ever make it through  
So long a winter. I’m already up  
Before the sunrise now, and when it comes,  
It rises cold. No, I’m a spring-time girl.  
I can’t stand winter.” Martha said, “Give me  
The summer! I’d be happy as a turtle,  
Just sitting on a log in the hot sun.  
Except for holidays, I hate the winter!”





But Dora smiled a dreaming smile and said,  
“The winter is my favorite time of all.  
I love to feel the prickle of the cold.  
It starts up visions of a spring and summer  
More beautiful than they could ever be.  
I curl myself up under my warm quilts  
And feel the most delicious shivers then.”  
“Oh, Dora!” cried the girls, and then they screamed  
At the appearance of a swaddled figure  
That glided from the shadows into view.

“Why all this shrieking, girls?” Out of the form  
A warm, familiar voice came. “Do you want  
To turn yourselves to snowballs in this wind?”  
“Oh, Widow Quiligos! Hello!” said Martha.  
“You scared us half to death!” “I’m sorry, girls.  
But why so late? You should be home in bed  
And dreaming pretty dreams of love to come,  
Such as are proper for your pretty heads.”  
“Our Dora’s just been talking about dreams,  
But dreams of quite a different sort,” said Martha.  
Then Dora, with self-righteous tilt of nose,  
Said, “We’re above such nonsense! We’ve just come  
From church, we’ve been there planning the bazaar.”  
The smiling widow raised a finger. “Now,  
You’ll pardon me for making little jokes.  
I know how hard you three work for us all,  
And always doing kindnesses in town.  
But after all, it’s almost midnight now,  
And my barometer is falling fast.  
There’s sure a snow-storm coming. You’d best hurry  
Before you catch pleuritis! Goodnight, girls!”

The three young ladies watched her bustle by  
And then burst into giggles, for the young  
Cannot imagine they themselves as old.



“The widow’s right, though,” Martha said.

“A storm

Is coming sure. I feel it in my bones.”

Betina humphed. “You’re far too thin,” she said.

“The only thing I feel is my bed calling,

And a nice cup of chocolate, hot and steamy.

I’ll see you both tomorrow, Martha, Dora!”

She drew her shawl more closely round her curls

And hurried off to promised coziness.

“And I’m off, too,” said Martha, but stopped short.

She noticed that her friend was staring through

The snow up to the mountain that rose high

North of the village. “Dora! Wake up, Dora!

What are you looking at?” She said, “Oh, listen!

Do you hear? It sounds like the wind is whispering

My name down from the mountain.”

Martha laughed.

“What, whispering? Ha! It’s hooting like a horn,

‘Bay-bay! Bay-bay!’ And you’re the little baby.

Now you’d best hurry home before that wind

Decides to freeze your silly head! Good night!”

And with that she was gone on tapping feet.

But Dora still defied the wind, and watched

The mountain, that great guardian of the town,

And listened to the howling of the gale,

And felt... and felt a something yet unknown—

She who had always known a world complete,

Each atom and each corner, every part

Of her short, narrow, neatly bordered life.

And then two snowflakes floating in the air

Descended and alighted on her lashes

To shock her with a sudden pinking cold.

She shivered, quickly raised her mittened hands,

And touched the lace-like crystals. Instantly



Their icy filigree was gone and flowed  
Like tears between her fingers to her cheeks,  
Frost-rouged, and there were dried up by the gale.  
Then pretty Dora, with decisive shrug  
And quick tug at her red scarf, turned and ran.

“Did you see? Did you see?” asked the young man  
Who stepped out of a sudden swirl of snow.  
“How beautiful! How graceful! How alive!  
Hot blood flows through her, I can feel it hot  
Around me even now. Oh! Did you guess  
This world held, could hold so much loveliness?”

Then slowly from the whirling snow there stepped  
An old man wrapped up in an overcoat  
Patched and worn thin but hanging to his feet,  
An old man with white hair and a red nose,  
Quite tall, quite thin, and on his wobbly head  
A stovepipe hat, black and on one side crushed.  
He coughed, he sneezed, he muttered peevishly,  
“You stupid child. Where have you dragged me to?  
Just look at me: Already I’ve caught cold  
From this clime. Why, it’s almost tropical!”

The one he spoke to seemed to be much younger,  
And handsome, like a statue carved of ice.  
Tall, muscular, and obviously strong,  
His hands were large, his shoulders wide and firm.  
The eyes and hair were black as winter’s night,  
But skin white as the snow, white as the stars  
That sparkled above the distant mountaintop.  
He spoke again in tones that seemed to sound  
From out the deeps of some glacier’s crevasse.  
“How beautiful! How graceful! Yes, alive!  
I want that! I should be like that. Oh, Father!”  
He spun on the old man, who, startled, sneezed.  
“Oh, Father, help me! Make some way for me



To meet her, speak to her. Do this for me!”

The old man wiped his red and dripping nose  
With a thin, wrinkled, worn out handkerchief.

“You foolish young folks, always full of wants  
Without a thought for any consequence.”

He tucked the handkerchief back in a pocket.

“I’ve been far too indulgent, greedy child,  
Letting you bring me here against my will.

Why do you scorn the beauties of our home,

Why do you favor everything that’s foreign?

Why do you search for what can only hurt?

Now listen to me, boy: these valley people

Are not for us. In their own narrow way

They’re decent creatures, to be generous.

But they’re not... lasting sorts. They are not solid.

They’re beings of the sun, and like the sun

They come and go, too quickly come and go.

They are as changeable as any breeze

That frolics hissing through our steep ravines,

Not serious, one can’t put one’s trust in them.

So listen to me, boy. Let’s go back home,

Let’s leave these valley people to themselves.

The wisest do not try to catch a flame.

Now come. Come with me. Be wise. Let’s go home.”

But has youth ever listened to wise age?

“How beautiful! How beautifully alive!”

The young man watched her go with eager eyes,

Then turned again to the old man. “Oh, help me!

You’ll help me, won’t you, Father? Say you will!”

“I certainly will not!” the old man said.

“What, help a fool to folly? I say, no!”

Fury and frenzy each by turns took hold

On the young man. But then he gained control

And slyly said, in soft, respectful tones,



“But Father, you, you made me what I am.  
Perhaps you spoiled me, spoiled this heart of mine  
By always playing with my boyish hopes.  
You led me here yourself, you did. And why?  
Just to torment me? Just to tease your boy?  
I know you wouldn’t play such games with me.  
You aren’t so cruel, you aren’t so pitiless.  
You’re far too kind to ever hurt me so.”

“I surely am too kind,” the other said.  
“But your incessant whining irritates  
And drives me almost to distraction, boy.  
And that’s the only reason I’ve allowed  
You to coerce me into coming here  
To this unwholesome place.” He coughed and spat.  
The old man sadly wiped his nose again.  
“My boy, if I could say one word to help,  
I’d say that word, you know I would. But now  
I see that any word I’d say is vain,  
For you are taken, I can see it plain,  
You’re taken by the poison of desire.  
I feared just this. Too late I have to face  
A truth I tried so hard to never see.  
Now even my most loving words are worthless,  
And I am far too weak to force you home.  
Oh, if I had the strength I had when young!”  
With his red, rheumy eyes he watched the snow  
Float down and mark his cracked and broken boots.  
“Remember this, boy: You must, without fail,  
Return to our dear mountaintop before  
The last day of this season, and no later.  
Without fail, child, before that day. Boy—listen!”

But the triumphant young man only smiled.  
“Thanks, Father.” And impatiently he urged,  
“Now help me! Hurry! Bring her back to me!”



The old man pulled his hat down on his head,  
Sighed deeply, and then gestured at the street.

The wind quick drew itself into a crouch,  
Then leaped along the street like a flung arrow.  
It flew straight through the narrow ways to Dora,  
Seized her red scarf and tugged it from her head,  
And bore it back like some storm-panicked bird  
Into the greedy hands of the young man.  
He caught it, lifted it, and sniffed the scent  
Of living, youthful beauty from its threads.  
He laughed aloud and would have called, but knew  
He was alone there in the flashing snow.  
The old man had already disappeared.

But Dora, when the wind stole her red scarf,  
Gasped, reached to seize it, missed, and quickly  
followed,

Running quick as quick can be to save it.  
The scarf flew just before her reaching hands,  
It mocked her with a flirting twitch and dipped  
Down toward the cobbles, rose again to taunt her.  
And just as her hand gained and came to touch,  
She found herself abruptly before someone,  
A young man, and unknown within the valley,  
And handsome, smiling, holding like a prize  
The red scarf. Dora gasped again from shock,  
But not from any fear—which frightened her.

“Oh!” Dora said, and “Oh!” the young man said.  
They looked at one another for what seemed  
A long time, while the world spun through the night,  
And they unmoving spun along with it.  
“You’ve caught my scarf,” at last said Dora. “Thank  
you.”

But did not reach her hand to take it from him.  
She only looked into his coal-black eyes



That gravely, soberly looked in her own.

"I wouldn't want to lose it," Dora said.

"I love it, for it was my mother's." Then

She quietly explained, "My mother's dead."

"Dead," whispered the young man. "So that which  
lives

Can die in this world, after all." He sighed.

"What did you say? I couldn't hear. The wind  
Ran off with your words." But he didn't answer,

He only looked at her who looked at him.

She stepped back. "I don't know you," she said softly.

"No," he said. "Where do you come from?" she asked.

"Are you a foreigner? Why are you here?"

"I am no foreigner. No, I was born

In this land. On the mountain." And he pointed.

She said, astonished, "Born up on the mountain!

But no one lives there. There's no town or farm,

Nor even any pass to the next valley.

We have to travel south for miles and miles.

There's just the glacier up there, ice and stone."

"Well, all the same, I came from there to you."

"To me...." she whispered. And, "How?" And then,  
"Why?"

"Because I saw you here," he answered simply.

"That's why." She breathed, "Oh." And her body  
trembled.

Without a word he shook out the red scarf

And flipped it round her, folding her in wool

And in his arms. His two firm, gentle hands

Touched her soft flesh. She breathed in at his touch,

A touch so cold, but so burningly warm.

Then terror caught her, or perhaps desire—

They are such near things in us when we're young.

Her brain told her to run, and yet her body



Stayed eagerly within that cold embrace.

“What are you doing?” Dora asked of him.

“I’m holding onto all my joy,” he said.

“What are you doing?” then she asked of him.

“I’m holding my life in my arms,” he said.

“What will you do then?” finally she asked.

“I’ll stay with you throughout the whole long  
winter,

Which then will be too short,” the young man  
promised.

The church bell sounded midnight for the town.

“Oh my!” cried Dora. “Father will be worried!

I have to hurry home now. I... I must!”

She turned, but quickly turned to him again.

“But you—where will you be? Where are you  
staying?”

He shrugged, new come from dreaming. “I don’t  
know.”

“It’s late. You mean you have no place to stay?

But it’s so cold, and getting colder. And

The snow, the snow is falling faster now.”

He looked about him, grinned, and shouted, “Yes!”

She smiled at that a moment, then she frowned,

And seriously and solemnly she thought.

She lowered her eyes—was it shyness?—then

She quietly, quite quietly, said, “Come.”

She took his strong hand in her own strong hand

And led him through the darkness to her home.

And with that touching ended their beginning,

And there began the long-determined end.







## II

The people of the village often asked,  
“Who is he? Where’s he come from? Nice, yes, but...”  
In all the streets, the shops, and in the church,  
From mouth to ear, from fence to door they asked,  
“Who is he? Where’s he come from? Nice, yes, but...”  
They asked, the old folks in astonished tones,  
The younger women with romantic sighs,  
The young men in a sort of grumping humph,  
“Who is he? Where’s he come from? Nice, yes, but...”  
To them all, Dora’s father only answered,  
“He says he comes from somewhere up the  
mountain.

That’s all I know. My Dora found him lost  
That night we had the first snow, with no coat,  
Without a hat. Of course she brought him home.  
What, could we let a poor man freeze to death?  
Of course not! That’s not how I raised my girl.  
I offered him a bed. He’s a good lad.  
I like him, he works hard, and, as for me,  
That’s all that matters in this world of ours.”

The young man had indeed begun to work  
That first day at the farm of the proud father.  
He cleaned the stable, brushed the old horse down;  
He forked the hay and heaved the bags of oats;



He eagerly went out without complaint,  
However cold the day was, or the night,  
In nothing more than thin gloves and a sweater,  
And those he only wore at Dora's urging.  
"This is high summer back where I come from!"  
He laughed. "But for you, Dora. There, all snug."  
He labored mightily throughout the day,  
Chopped wood, chopped ice to get at the well's water,  
Repaired the hay loft roof after a squall.  
Without a word, but with a smile, he worked,  
Slow, steady, irresistible as time,  
Did everything the father asked him to.

At evening, after supper, the three sat—  
The father, and the daughter, and the stranger—  
Around the stove that glowed with ardent flame:  
The stranger not too close, behind the others.  
Then pretty Dora read aloud from novels,  
Or from the weekly paper, or the scriptures,  
And often, usually, from the warmth  
And from the droning of her songful voice,  
The father soon dozed off. The young man, though,  
With fervent eagerness took in each word  
About this strange world full of things alive—  
He drank whatever word that dear mouth spoke  
Consumed whatever tale that loved voice told.  
And then when Dora, wearied, set aside  
The journal or the novel, and raised up  
Her searching, hungry eyes to feast herself  
By freely looking at the now-known stranger,  
Then silence sang so wildly in the room  
That even winter's tempests hushed themselves.

Betina, Martha, and her other friends  
Remarked the changes in the lovely maid.  
"She's acting like a woman with gray hair,"



Complained Betina. Martha answered, "No,  
Our Dora's just grown serious, Betina."  
"That's what I mean! She's lost her sense of fun."  
"No, she's just come out of her silly youth."  
"But young folks *should* be silly!" cried Betina.  
"If we're not silly, we're just... ignorant!"  
"Betina!" Martha laughed. "Well, you rest easy.  
You'll never find yourself called ignorant."

They questioned Dora, whether openly  
Or artfully, but after gaining only  
Evasive answers, or no answer, they  
Retreated disappointed and gave up,  
Although the young newcomer was so nice,  
So pleasant, and so handsome, and so friendly—  
Too friendly, said the young men of the town.  
Weeks passed, the days grew shorter, longer grew  
The nights, and soon the people of the town  
Became accustomed to how things now stood:  
That there were now two foreigners among them—  
The handsome stranger and this strange, new Dora.

This strange, new Dora paid their talk no mind.  
She never listened to their chattering gossip,  
Nor noticed how they... not avoided her,  
But not so lightly, thoughtlessly flocked round  
As they were used to do. But winter is  
An inside time, and Dora did not grieve  
Nor even feel her newfound isolation.  
Her happy heart was far too full of joy,  
A joy firm, faithful, solemn, and content.  
At last she had a goal, a simple goal  
Renewed and strengthened every tardy dawn  
When she put down his breakfast plate before him;  
Renewed and strengthened every afternoon  
When she took up his napkin from the table;



Renewed and strengthened every evening when  
She put aside the paper or the book,  
Looked up and saw—with always fresh surprise—  
That someone who with fresh surprise looked back.

One Sunday service, Widow Quiligos  
Said to her, “My dear Dora! I’m so glad  
To see you here! It seems that you’ve been hiding,  
We lately seldom see you in the town.  
I know, it’s winter, with our iffy weather,  
And then of course you’re obviously in love.  
Now, don’t look so surprised, dear girl, it’s plain.  
Your face glows now with something more than cold!  
Your loveliness seems somehow more mature—  
I think that’s one of love’s gifts to young hearts.  
And when you’re with him... my, your eyes! They tell  
The secret to those wise enough to see.  
I may be old now, but I can remember  
The way the handsome young men came to call,  
The way they’d take my hand. So long ago....  
I lived those courting days as in a dream,  
And friends and parents all made fun of me.  
I didn’t bring my poor feet back to earth  
Till after I was married, rather scared  
To feel the gravity of married life.  
But then—would you believe it?—I found out  
That with my love this plain old world of ours  
Was just as beautiful as any dream,  
Because I carried from my dream of love  
The love itself, till my dear husband died.  
Oh me,” she sighed, but smiled. “And, oh, dear girl,  
Would you imagine? Even now this world  
Still seems as beautiful to me. And why?  
Because that love, my love, still lives in me,  
As fresh and young as when he first came knocking.



So never fear! You treasure all your love,  
And carry it with you back to our world.  
If it's as strong as I can see it is,  
It will be just as safe here as in dreams."  
She looked up at the sky. "There's more snow  
coming,"

She said, and smiled, and quickly walked away,  
While Dora watched her with astonishment.

That evening after supper, when her father  
Was dozing, Dora folded up the paper.  
The good young man waited expectantly,  
More than content to watch her pretty face.  
"My friend," she said. "My dearest love," he said.  
Her heart stopped for an instant, then beat fast.  
"My darling," she said, smiling, "there's been talk."  
She saw he did not, could not understand.  
"About us. In the village. People talk.  
It's just what people do. And for myself,  
I don't care what they say, no, not a jot.  
But for my father... he's respectable,  
And well thought of by everyone." "Of course,"  
The stranger said, "and rightly so, my love."  
"So then," she said it quickly, "we should marry."  
She anxiously watched him. He only smiled.  
"My love, I'll do whatever you can wish."  
She sighed, relieved. And then he said, "What's  
'marry'?"

She stared, then laughed. "Oh, my dear love! And are  
You ready to make this great step for me,  
When you don't even know what marriage is?"  
He answered simply, "If you wish me to."

Again her heart clenched, and she clutched her  
breast  
To hold in check her painful happiness.



“To marry is when lovers stand together  
And tell the world that they will stay together,  
Whatever happens, until they shall die.”

“Oh, then I’ll do that gladly!” said the youth.

“I want to say in front of everyone  
That I will stay with you until...” The words  
Died on his lips and sadness covered him.

“My love,” he softly said. “I can’t say that.”

The happiness in Dora’s heart grew weak,  
Collapsed, and threatened. “Why?” she asked.

“But why?”

He mournfully said, “Oh, I want to, yes!  
I want to stay with you through every day,  
Through every season. But I have to go.”

“Go?” Dora breathed. “At winter’s end, I must.  
I told you so that night when we first met.”

“At winter’s end....” “But I’ll come back!” he cried.

“I will! I’ll come again as I first came,  
I’ll come with the first snow of winter, Dora.  
But when spring comes, when green things start  
to grow,

And through the summer with its cruel sun,  
And through the fickle autumn’s teasing frosts,  
I must be in my old home on the mountain.”

He watched her then with great fear in his eyes.

The young girl’s desperation leaped and seized  
At that one saving word, “home,” held it like  
A drowning man holds to a saving cord.

“Your home?” she said, too eagerly. “Your home?  
Do you still have a home there on the mountain?  
Do you still have your friends and family there?  
Do you support some poor old father, dear?  
Is that why you must go away from me?”

Although he did not fully understand,



He simply answered, "I will have to go."

Then stubborn happiness resumed its place.

"Well, now I understand!" young Dora cried.

"You go to help your family, of course.

They certainly have every right to that,

That is your duty, just as it is mine,

For I would never leave my father here

Without my helping. And you too, my love,

You surely have there someone just as dear,

A father, or a mother, or grandmother—"

"Just one old man," the stranger said, confused,

But then he asked her, "Dora, will you wait?"

She looked into his anxious, hoping face.

"Oh, love, my love!" She stood and rushed to him,

Embraced him fiercely, kissed him greedily,

And murmured to those starving lips, "I'll wait!

I'll wait, I'll always wait, I'll gladly wait,

Because I'll have three months with you, a prize

More rich than years with any other man."

He lifted her into the air. She cried,

"Your strong arms burn and chill me, dearest love!"

The father woke then with a startled yawn.

"What is this? Children! Why make so much noise?"

They leapt apart and Dora, grinning, said,

"Well, Father, we've decided we must marry."

Now wide awake, the father said to them

In solemn tones, "Young man, go to your room.

You leave us here a little while. Go on."

And then, more kindly, "Do as I say. Go."

The stranger looked at Dora, saw no fear,

But only certainty, and left the room.

Her father said, "Let's talk this over, darling.

Sit here beside me, let me have your hand,

That hand I held so often long ago



To help you walk when you were just a baby.  
Oh, cold! Let's move here closer to the stove.  
But your hand is no more a baby's, is it?  
It closed your mother's dear eyes when she passed,  
Too soon, too soon. It's worked, and worked so hard,  
To feed your widowed father, and to clean  
Our little home, and keep us neat and proper.  
It's now the hand of no child, but a woman.  
And now you want to give it to another,  
A young man, strong and proper, a good man.  
I understand, yes, but it makes me sad.  
I'm sorry for the years I let slip by  
Without a thought that every minute gone  
Would bring us to this happy time for you.  
No, I'm not sad, not really. But I worry.  
I'd worry over any beau who came,  
I'd worry if it were a village lad.  
A father will be worried for his girl.  
But this young man... I like him very much.  
He works, and works hard, he's been brought  
up right,  
He's gentle, and he's good, one look proves that.  
I can't see anything bad in his heart.  
But who is he? Where is his family?  
Two months gone by, and we know nothing more  
Than we knew that cold night when he first came.  
Now, don't be angry with me. Sit and listen.  
I'm not attacking him, no, not at all.  
I see in you the same first joy in love  
That I myself felt on that day long gone  
When your dear mother said her "Yes" to me.  
And I was then no older than yourself.  
We were just children! Silly children, but  
We thought we knew then all we'd need to know.





And somehow... well, yes, somehow we were right.  
She's dead now, and you're grown to be a woman,  
And soon, too soon I'll be alone. Don't cry!  
I'm happy for you, for your joy in him.  
That joy's all any father wants to see,  
That's my reward for all my years of care.  
But oh, I'm still afraid for you, afraid  
Of sorrow that might come out of your love  
For this unknown one, good as he may be."

She stopped him with a finger on his lips,  
And smiled through tears. She gravely took his hands  
With her now warmer hands, and said to him,  
"Oh, papa, I can understand your fear,  
But papa, even though I'm still so young,  
Perhaps a child still, I can tell you this:  
Sorrow will come, whatever we may do  
To try to shield ourselves from any hurt.  
But joy will also come, and when it comes  
We have to hold it hard as hard can be.  
We have to keep our hold, because at last  
Sorrow will come again. And when it comes,  
That joy we held and hold will be with us,  
To keep us and sustain us, till we die."

Her father saw her with astonished eyes.  
"Do you believe that, really, darling Dora?  
She fiercely answered, "Yes, with all my heart."  
"Well," said her father, "then you are no child.  
You're wiser than your poor old father, dear.  
For I believe that too, because the joy  
I found with your dear mother stays with me  
Through all these years of loneliness. But I  
Was forced to learn it after that great pain.  
So." He stood up and raised her to her feet.  
"I won't be fearful for you anymore.



Fear's nothing, put against your kind of love.  
Go call your young man. No doubt he's on edge.  
Let's put him at his ease. Go fetch him in."

She bounded to the door and called to him,  
He instantly came running, and the father  
Put in his cold hand Dora's own warm hand.  
In that way were they bound before the vows.

That night was the last night of January.  
There now remained one month of winter's cold.





### III

The days now raced away too rapidly  
While all the townsfolk eagerly prepared  
Themselves to celebrate a winter wedding.  
Her young friends, who had felt shut out by that  
Too private love of Dora and the stranger,  
Now flocked to share her public happiness.  
Betina came with Martha every day  
To help to sew the snow-white wedding gown.  
“It’s going to be the prettiest dress you’ve seen!”  
Betina said. “Not if *that’s* how you sew,”  
Said Martha. “Pay attention! Chatter, chatter!  
How can you make fine stitches for this lace  
If you keep babbling on, Betina? Look!  
You might as well sew with a fish-hook!” This  
Was only joking, for Betina was  
Renowned in town for skillful needlecraft.

Not just the young. The Widow Quiligos  
Proposed herself to decorate the church,  
And offered as a token to the bride  
The veil she’d worn herself so long ago.  
“It’s probably old-fashioned,” said the Widow,  
“Quite out of style. But since your mother’s gone...”  
“Oh, no!” said Dora, “It’s so beautiful!  
I love it even more because it’s yours.”



She thanked her with a kiss that brought a blush  
Of pleasure to the older woman's cheek.

The days passed, and with every passing day  
The stranger grew less tranquil, more distraught.

"Why do you put the wedding off this way?"

He asked. "Why all this nonsense about food  
And decorations and a special dress?

I do not understand you people here."

The father answered, "This is how we are.

We do such things as they've been done forever.

You're one of us now, my dear boy. With us,

Our customs are important, for without

Our customs we're no more than animals,

As solitary as the grumpy bears

That wander by themselves out in the hills.

It's customs that construct society.

Be patient. All in good time you will see

That our old ways will bring it all to pass."

"Too slowly," thought the bridegroom, but he kept

His council, for he saw that words were vain.

The days passed, ever longer in their passing,

Each new day longer than the one before,

Each new night longer than the one to come.

The noon sun each day climbed a little higher,

The morning star shone earlier each dawn,

And in the eyes of the young stranger shone

A somber spark of ever-growing fear.

His handsome pale face showed his weariness,

Became more gray, grew thin and almost sharp.

When pitching hay, his strong hands lost their grip.

He walked less quickly, and he sometimes stumbled.

With each new snow he briefly caught again

The gaiety and careless strength of youth,

But new snow fell less often, and less deep.



Already grass was showing through the snow,  
Still brown, but with a hint of last year's green.

Young Dora was too busy now to notice.  
The wedding preparations filled her mind.  
At evening she no longer read aloud,  
But talked about the dishes to be served,  
The decorations for the little church,  
How Martha'd added to the dress a knot  
Of ribbons that transformed it utterly,  
Or some news from a young friend in the town  
From whom she'd too long absented herself.  
The father dozed off while she chattered on.  
The young man only watched her silently;  
Unhearing, unresponding, motionless.  
But when they kissed goodnight he came alive,  
Held her so fervently that she was shocked  
Out of her social cloud and back to love.  
They kissed, they drank, they inhaled one another,  
Felt their two hearts beat pressed together, felt  
The flow of yearning blood move with one pulse  
To their desiring skin. The young girl blushed.  
The pale man's cheeks grew paler. "Only this,"  
He whispered to her, "only this forever.  
Your beauty real and solid in my hands,  
Your fire so close against me. Only this."  
"Oh, love," she gasped, "that's all that I could want.  
To stay forever held by you like this,  
Safe in your hands, safe here against the world.  
We'll have that soon, so soon, my darling. Soon."  
And he, despairing, hopeless, echoed, "Soon."  
The decorations finally were done.  
"I never saw a church so beautiful!  
You've done it up fine, Widow Quiligos,"  
The father said. "How hard you must have worked!"



She had worked hard and long, arranging all  
The oldest and most fragile ornaments:  
Cut crystal vases and squat blown-glass bowls  
Were filled with blue-green spruce and shining holly  
And Christmas roses white as fading snow.  
She'd sewn new satin cloths for every pew,  
And colored ribbons tied up every cushion  
To offer pleasure when one knelt to pray.  
To drape the little altar, she'd embroidered  
Cream-colored daisies on a white silk ground.  
"I'm dazzled, Widow Quiligos! And all  
For my girl Dora!" Pleased but flustered, she  
Responded, "Dora's worth some little toil.  
You rarely see a winter wedding now,  
These girls now think that spring's the proper time.  
But Dora's giving us a chance to bring  
A little spring into the winter's gloom."  
"The boy has duties, family on the mountain,"  
The father said. "He'll have to work for them  
Come spring. That's why we're celebrating now.  
A real man knows his duties. He'll do his,  
For he's a real man, and a good man, too.  
My Dora will be well with such a man."  
Two days remained until the wedding rite.  
The cooking for the wedding banquet started.  
"Don't touch those cookies! Honestly, Betina,"  
Warned Martha, but Betina furtively  
Had taken one small, pretty honey-cake,  
And couldn't answer, for her mouth was full.  
"She'll never know," she thought. But Martha knew,  
And quickly rearranged the plate of sweets.  
Besides the wedding cake, the sideboard groaned  
With stacks of buckwheat cakes and maple syrup,  
And butter cookies, currant cakes, and heaps



Of lemon macaroons and chocolate bark,  
Boiled ribbon candy, yellow caramels,  
Pistachios, walnuts, almonds, and pecans,  
And dried and sugared fruits of every kind,  
Pineapple, ginger, apricots, and figs.  
Then for the wedding feast itself, baked ham  
And roasted turkey stuffed with barley corn,  
Mashed turnips and braised carrots, brussels sprouts,  
Beans cooked with garlic, onions, cinnamon,  
Braised endive, slaw, and buttered purple beets.  
For drink there would be cider, beer, and wine.  
The tables were set out with everyone's  
Best china dishes, heirloom silverware,  
Substantial mugs, and glassware saved for toasts.  
Astonished, Dora looked at all her friends  
Had done, and cried out, "Thank you! Oh,  
          thank you!  
I've never been so touched in all my life.  
You've worked so hard! And doing this, you've  
          shown  
That you've accepted my love as your friend.  
There's never been a bride so lucky. Thank you!"  
One day remained until the wedding rite.  
That day was bitter cold, and in the sky  
Soft flakes of weary snow fell as if loath  
To touch the ground. They prickled on the scalp,  
The nose, the eyes, the bare back of the neck.  
The stranger labored in a windbreak, where  
He chopped at logs to fill the greedy stove.  
He wore no gloves nor coat, nor any cap.  
He fiercely but precisely swung the axe,  
Not like one who fulfills a needful task,  
But like one who would split the world apart.  
With every swing the splits and splinters flew.



He leaned down to pick up a length of wood  
And saw before him two cracked, much-worn boots,  
Two long, thin legs in trousers, a black coat,  
And far above them a tall stovepipe hat,  
Black, dusty, stained, and leaning to one side.

“Ah,” said the youth. “And so you’ve come again.”

The old man sniffed and snuffled and replied,

“As you can see. You were expecting me.”

The young man grunted, “Why now?” “You  
know why.”

The old man coughed. “Excuse me. Oh, this  
warmth!”

“If it’s so bad, why don’t you stay at home?”

The stranger petulantly said. “*Our* home,”

The other said. “Well, I’ve been waiting there

On our old mountain, counting out the days,

The minutes, patiently. But you don’t come.

So I at last, despite the risks I run

In this unhealthy climate, have come down

To fetch you back. No, don’t feel guilty, boy.

Lift up your head and look me in the eye.”

He smiled. “My boy, what do you think of me?

That I can’t understand the way you feel?

Don’t worry, I’m not angry with you. No.

I’m sorry for you, for I understand.

But *you* must try to understand me, too.

I want to keep safe someone whom I love,

You know what day this is. You know, too well,

That you must leave here, that you must  
come home.”

“Not yet!” the young man cried. “No, not today!

Just one day more, please, Father! Just one day.

One day, and I will come as you demand.

Oh!” he exclaimed, “Why are these folk so slow?





When they've made up their minds, why don't  
they act?

They always say, 'Tomorrow's soon enough.'  
They always put off what they most desire,  
Delay their happiness, as if they have  
An endless line of days before them, when  
They have so few, when so soon they are gone!"  
Again he put his head down in frustration  
And for the first time wished that he could cry.

The old man smiled and put a clawlike hand  
Upon the young one's shoulder. "So I warned.  
I warned you of these shallow summer people.  
They don't last, and not lasting, they just... glide.  
Without eternity, they have no depth.  
They are the beings of one sunny day,  
These may-fly people. But we two, my boy,  
As long as the world is, we two will be."

Despairing, the young stranger dropped the axe  
And grabbed the hand of the old gentleman.

"One day, just one day! Father, give me this!  
Tomorrow we'll be married. When we're bound  
According to her ways, I'll come with you,  
Believe me. This I promise. But one day!"

"Too quick to promise, too quick to forget."

"I'll gladly come," the young man said. "I swear.  
You can believe me, Father. Would I stay  
When staying here, I know, would mean the end?  
And I don't want this all to end, oh no!  
Not now that I can have what I must have.  
Believe me, Father. Give me this one day."

The old man sadly and suspiciously  
Regarded the young man a while. He sneezed  
And, pulling out the thin gray handkerchief  
And wiping at his nose, he gruffly muttered,



“I’m softening in all this heat, I guess.  
A fool, that’s what I am. A weak, old fool.”  
The young man laughed and leapt into the air.  
“You’ll sit beside us at the wedding feast!”  
“Oh, no!” the old man, startled, cried out. “No!  
You block-brained boy, you know they mustn’t  
see me!

Goodbye. Despite my worries... well, goodbye.  
But you remember—only one more day.  
You feel that wind? It’s blowing from the south.  
It’s coming from the lands forbidden us.  
So keep your promise, boy, and do not fail.”  
He gave him one lamenting, nervous look,  
And then a gust of snow enveloped him.  
He disappeared, relieved, into the white.

The voice of the beloved called out from  
Across the field, “Where are you, love?” He turned.  
Stark terror clutched his heart, but then he called,  
“I’m here, my love! I’m coming to you, love!”

The night passed quickly, and the morning came.  
The bell rang from the steeple of the church,  
The people of the village came together.  
The two betrothed each gave the promised pledge.  
The people cried out their congratulations,  
And celebrated then with song, dance, food,  
and drink

Throughout the afternoon, so strangely warm.  
Then, full, content, they led the married pair  
Back to the waiting home, and laughing left  
The wife and husband, now forever one.  
A southern breeze wrapped round them on  
the porch.

He took her hand, pressed it, and led her in.  
Again, with words and touching, they exchanged



The ancient vows that bind two promised hearts,  
They filled dark night with greedy, generous giving,  
Made music out of sighs and sudden gasps,  
Of pleasure given and of pleasure taken.

Love, timeless and beyond time, ends at last.  
The satiated body is exhausted;  
The reaching hand slows, falters, weakens, falls;  
The searching, murmuring mouth falls silent; breath,  
Once stormy, slows, calms, softens into sleep;  
The body stills, cools; quiet gives its peace.

He slept, and yet it seemed he did not sleep.  
He sensed a threatening, a fearful warmth,  
And yet there was no sun, no flame-red hearth,  
No, nothing, nothing but the sleeping wife  
Who held him in her sleep with her hot arms,  
With her hands like two shining, burning brands.  
He tried to cry out, but he could not breathe,  
He tried to part his lips, could not, his mouth  
Seemed to be melting, flowed like molten ore....

He woke and heard a something at the pane,  
The scratching of an urgent, clawlike hand.  
It softly beckoned, urging him. He stood,  
Pulled on his clothes, and after one long look  
At his so lovely, so loved, sleeping bride,  
He turned from her, and swiftly went away.





## IV

The bride awoke to springtime and a bed  
Grown cold beside her from her husband gone.  
Quick panic seized on Dora. "Oh my husband,  
Why did you let me sleep through your goodbye?"  
Then she remembered and at last grew calm.  
"He'll come again. He said so. With first snow,"  
She firmly told herself. "Be patient, fool!  
You're not a baby anymore. You're wed.  
You are a wife, a grown-up woman now.  
Don't other women suffer this, and worse?  
The wives of soldiers and of sailors know  
The frequent absence of their husbands, too,  
And worse, they know the dangers they endure.  
But you, you have what they don't have: You know  
That your man's coming back to you, and soon."  
Doubt tickled at her. "What about the people?  
They'll never understand. They'll gossip, sure,  
Or worse, they'll be too kind and pity me.  
Well, they won't have the chance. They'll see I smile,  
Because I truly know that he'll be back.  
I *do* know he'll be back, and if I show  
That I believe, then they'll believe it, too.  
He promised, he'll be back with the first snow.  
Till now I liked the winter just because



So many others like it least of all.  
But now I love it, for it brings my love.  
I hate the spring, because it took him from me.  
I'll wish it quick away, and summer, too.  
I'll hate the green and growing things, and wish  
For cold and frost. I'll make my heart as hard  
As granite stone to last until he comes."  
She wiped away a tear impatiently.  
"No crying for you, Dora! He will see  
That I am confident and trust in him.  
So." Dora stood and quickly dressed herself,  
Went to the kitchen, lit the stove, filled up  
The coffeepot and set it on the fire.  
She cracked the eggs into the sizzling pan  
To make the breakfast for her father, who  
Looked round the room and asked, "But where's  
your husband?  
Has he already gone out to the barn?"  
"He's left," she answered him as carelessly  
As she was able, "as he said he would."  
"So soon?" exclaimed the father. Firmly, she  
Repeated, "As he always said he would."  
"Of course," replied the father. "There's his folks,  
He's got to see to them. That does him credit.  
We've maybe kept him here too long, I saw  
That he was kind of nervous these last days.  
I thought it was a bridegroom's being scared,  
But he was surely thinking of his kin.  
We should have hurried up the wedding day,  
But we weren't thinking but about ourselves."  
He wiped his mouth and stood up from his chair.  
"Well, there's the day's work still needs to be done,  
And with one good strong pair of hands the less."  
He looked at her a moment, then stepped out.



Too many times throughout the coming days,  
While snowdrifts shrank and melted into earth,  
While fields and streams and lakes and  
vineyards thawed,  
While new green sprouts pushed up out of the soil  
Towards the warming sun, she had to say,  
“He’s left just as he said he must, he’s gone  
To take care of his people, who need him.  
My man knows where his duty lies, and does it.”  
But how she always said those bitter words,  
So self-assured, why, almost happily!  
It stopped the townsfolks’ mouths, but some  
still said,  
Among themselves, and never in her hearing,  
“He’s gone to help his family, that’s his duty,  
But what about our Dora? She’s his wife.  
Do husbands have no duties to their wives?”  
“I hear they’re old folks, can’t work for themselves,”  
Some other always said. “I hope my kids  
Will think as much of me as he of his.”  
“Well, Dora’s father is no child himself.  
Now, doesn’t he deserve the husband’s help?”  
“It’s not our place to settle their affairs.  
If Dora’s happy, we’ve no right to judge.”  
“No, no, you’re right, of course. It’s up to them.”  
And that’s the way these conversations closed.  
Betina naturally did not expect  
To see too much of Dora once she’d wed,  
For married women often have no time  
To keep up with their youthful single friends.  
But with the husband not at home, Betina  
Came often to the farmhouse for a gossip.  
“Of course they talk about you, Dora dear,  
Just like they talk about us all. They say,



‘That Dora’s far too much alone.’ They say,  
‘What if her husband’s had to go away?  
That’s no excuse to not enjoy herself.’  
That’s what they say. But I just tell them, ‘No,  
That’s not the way our Dora thinks, not her.  
She’s now a wife, she has her duties, too,  
Just as he has his duties to his kin.  
Then there’s her father to attend to, and  
The work they have to keep that farm in trim,  
And if she doesn’t waste her time in fun,  
Like silly single girls so often do,  
That’s to her credit, and to our own shame.’  
That’s what I say, and Martha says it, too,  
And so you know it must be right. Of course,  
You mustn’t take such talk too much to heart,  
It’s true that trifling minds think trifling thoughts,  
But what’s the use to be a human being  
If you can’t put yourself in others’ shoes?  
We only want you to be happy, dear,  
Whatever burden you’ve been forced to bear.  
What time is it? Oh goodness, I must go,  
Livonia is expecting me to tea  
And says her handsome city cousin’s come,  
That’s why I put my new blue bonnet on,  
Although he certainly won’t give two looks  
To any common, scrubby, country girl,  
But then you never know, there’s stranger things...  
And really, isn’t this blue bonnet sweet?  
I’m late, I must run, Dora, pet. Goodbye!”  
But Dora sat on, without word or thought,  
Till sunset. Then she rose to cook the meal.

One day the south wind blew into the town  
A wandering man, good-looking, brash, and young.  
He carried on his back a sloppy pack



And swung a knobbly stick in his right hand.  
He swaggered carelessly with a large stride  
And sang a merry and an obscene song,  
A song about a woman and a traveler.  
The women hearing it pretend to blush,  
The men pretend they do not hear at all,  
But hide a later laugh far from their wives.  
The fresh-faced fellow quickly spied the inn,  
Marched in and dropped his pack and called out loud,  
“Innkeeper! Bring me out your finest fare!  
Some good roast beef with lots of pepper in it,  
As spicy as the ladies of your town!  
And let’s have bread as tasty and as fresh  
As any of your pretty local girls!  
And let me have some stronger drink than that  
I’ve had from mountain torrents this past week.  
It was so cold it almost froze my throat!  
If there’s no wine yet, I’ll make do with beer,  
But pale beer, fellow, yellow like the sun  
That’s how I like my beer and women, too!  
Don’t worry, I’ve got money, I can pay.  
I’ll give you gold, or silver if you like,  
Or I can pay you with a song as well,  
A song about the countries I’ve been through.  
Friends, listen up! I’ll sing you songs I sang  
Down south to wake the grass and trees and earth  
While they were snoring under their snow-quilts.  
I ordered them to put on their green gowns  
To give us something pretty for our eyes,  
And they were glad to do it, I can say.  
The rams out in the cotes, they heard my song.  
Before you knew it, lambs were in the fields  
And frisking through that clover tasty sweet.  
I won’t tell how young fellows took my song





Because the ladies might not like straight talk,  
But my song just won't be unheard, no sir,  
And don't you know? It even woke the dead!  
It reached right down into those winter graves  
And pulled the dead right up onto their toes  
Until they danced and started in to love!  
Now that's a song! So will you have my song  
As pay for this here feast fit for a king?  
No? Only money, eh? Oh, my new friends,  
I see now why the winter's been so long  
In this here valley—frosty souls like cold!  
But even here I see there is some blood  
Pulsating hot in one or two sweet hearts.  
Like you, for instance, eh, my pretty girl?"  
Betina, passing by the tavern's door,  
Had heard the accent musical and strange  
Of some newcomer, and she, curious,  
Had listened, caught up by his boasting talk.  
But she evaded handily the pinch  
He tried to give, and answered, furious,  
"You saucy scoundrel! Brassy, shameless brute!  
In this town gentlemen don't play such games!"  
"Then more's the shame to them!" the young  
man cried,  
And offered an admiring pat. She jumped.  
"You mind those hands! I am a virtuous girl!"  
He laughed a braying laugh. "To hell with virtue!  
That virtue is a frozen winter thing,  
Not fitting for a ripe spring thing like you.  
And in these mountain valleys you well know  
The sun, like me, won't stay about for long.  
Let's take advantage while it's shining warm.  
Too soon you'll see the greedy ice will creep  
Down from that mountain to retake the fields.



Don't let them lie unploughed, my pretty maid."  
His voice, now quiet, low, and dangerous,  
Stopped her and made her blush and held her fast.  
Betina, though, despite his handsome face  
And flashing, mocking eyes and flirting tones,  
Raised up her nose and, with a noble sniff,  
Turned round and left the tavern with a flounce.  
The wanderer kept smiling, said again,  
"No, like the sun, I won't be here for long.  
But maybe, mind, against my better judgment,  
I'll stay a little, just a little while.  
For such a flame a man can risk a chill!"

In days to come some townsfolk said they'd seen  
The brash young man had built himself a camp,  
A simple blanket stretched between two trees  
Down by the river. Late at night they'd hear  
His big voice booming out with song or laughter.  
Some others said that, quite unlike herself,  
Betina wasn't seen so much with friends  
Or gossiping the afternoons away,  
But often strolled on paths outside the town  
Alone, in fields and meadows, in the woods,  
Sometimes along the southward-flowing river.  
And people said that sometimes, now and then,  
That jolly, roaming fellow in his camp  
Stopped laughing, stopped his singing, and fell still.

"Well, that's what some folks do say," Martha said  
To Dora while they threaded darning needles.  
"Of course I don't believe it, not a bit.  
Betina's silly, but she's not a fool.  
She knows a lady's reputation is  
The only thing that matters in this world.  
Why would a young girl throw herself away  
On some poor vagabond who wanders through,



However handsome he might be. Oh!”

Martha stopped.

She reddened, furiously began to search

For scissors or a pin she must have dropped.

“You ask why would she?” Dora softly said.

“Because sometimes, not often, but sometimes,

Without a warning, even against your will,

You’ll see a look, a smile, or you might hear

The echo of a once-remembered voice,

Or catch the scent of distant rain, or feel

A touch that somehow wakes a memory.

And then, however jealously you guard

Your reputation, you won’t give a fig.

You’ll gladly see it crumble into dust.

Your way is set, and that’s the way you’ll go.

So watch yourself, dear Martha,” Dora smiled.

“Such questions might attract a destiny

You wouldn’t want to find out is your own.”

She set aside her needle, ball, and stocking

And watched the sun glow through the curtains’ lace.

One afternoon late in the blooming spring

The wanderer, with his pack upon his back,

A crocus at his ear, a scent of turf,

Stomped to the inn and slammed his burden down.

“Innkeeper! Bring me out your finest fare!

Some salty mutton, beer, and bread, and hurry!

For this day is the day I’m heading north

And I will need a good meal in my gut

To keep me warm and well against their cold!

I like your valley, it’s a fine, fair place,

But now it’s green all over, growing well,

And I prefer a land about to sprout.

What? Only a boiled chicken? And brown bread?

I see I’ve picked the right time to move on.



At least your beer is faithful to a man,  
So fill that mug again, and fill it high.  
What say we toss the dice to pay the bill?  
Ho ho, I see your heart still hasn't thawed.  
I'd offer you a funny song instead,  
But I know far too well you have no taste.  
So here, catch, take your money! Silver coins,  
And not as hard as your hard heart, innkeeper!  
I dare say you will someday wish me back.  
But now, farewell!" He whistled through the door,  
And strolled along the street and out of sight.

They say Betina stayed inside her room  
For one whole day, not feeling very well.  
But next day her friends noticed that her cheeks  
Were even plumper and more rosy pink,  
Her voice was gay and bubbled with delight,  
And that she watched the young men of the town  
With more appraising, more considering looks.  
"It's such a pretty spring!" she said to Dora  
While walking with her by the general store.  
"So pretty, but the seasons rush along.  
Spring's almost gone, we'll have a good, hot summer  
Just right for corn and grain, and for the vines.  
I have it from a good source, one who knows.  
And you'll be happy, Dora, won't you, dear,  
To see the end of spring? One season gone,  
Two seasons left, and then your love returns.  
Oh, my," she sighed, "For you there's only two...."  
Astonished, Dora looked at her, and traced  
Betina's wishing gaze cast to the north.  
And she saw, too, the distant mountain peak,  
Still white with its eternal cap of snow  
That hid the husband to whom she was bound  
By law, by custom, by wish, and by love.



## V

Bright summer, and the fields were shining green  
With growing vegetables and cereals.  
The cattle and the sheep grazed lazily  
Beneath the yellow sun. The vines grew dark  
And heavy with the slowly purpling grapes.  
The river, after its first springtime rush  
Of frigid water melted from the heights,  
Subsided to a stolid dignity.  
Beside her father, Dora gathered up  
The hay he cut, and piled it in the wagon.  
She grieved to see her father, winded, stop  
To wipe the sweat away from his lined brow.  
She grieved, and felt a jolt of anger, too,  
To see him labor so without the help  
Of one... of one who did his duty elsewhere,  
And quick she put aside that idle fury:  
Ignoble, shameful thought that dared to prick.  
For she herself was young, and strong, and able.  
Her father did not work alone, oh no,  
She worked beside him as she always had,  
Since coming to an age to be of use.  
So this year was no different than the last.  
“It’s too hot, papa,” Dora said. He paused  
And rested on the scythe. “You’re tired, sweet?”



“Oh, no!” she cried. “But it’s too hot for you.  
You mustn’t push yourself—” “Oh, mustn’t I?  
And why?” the father asked. “Because I’m old?  
Well, girl, I wasn’t born before the flood.  
I’ve still got some good years in these old arms,  
And I can outwork most of these young scamps!  
I’ve got experience. If I’m not as strong,  
I work a whole lot smarter than they can!”  
He smiled. “But I can see you’re getting burned.  
That mean old sun is dangerous for you.  
You’d best be careful, for there’s someone who  
Will want to see you fair when he gets home.  
And I don’t want you dried up either, dear.  
Your prettiness reminds me of your mother.  
I’m hungry. Must be getting on toward noon.  
You run on to the house and start the dinner.”  
Unwillingly, and seeing through his ruse,  
She put aside the rake and left him there.

As she approached, she saw a man unknown  
Who leaned upon the porch-post and stared out  
Quite seriously at a distant cloud.  
He had a stalk of grass between his teeth  
And hummed an irritating melody  
That mercilessly teased the memory.  
Abruptly, Dora asked him, “Who are you?”  
He slowly turned and drawled, “Well, well, hello.  
Hello there, pretty lady of the house!  
I guess you are the lady of the house,  
Because it looks as neat and trim as you.”  
He gave a bow; but was he mocking her?  
For Dora was sweat-damp and pollen-stained.  
He was a big man, in the prime of life,  
Tall, wide, and dense, and with a great black beard



Through which shone teeth as startling white  
as paint.

His clothes were dirty, thin from wear, and patched.  
His boots were brown and stained, cut at the toes.  
He affably observed her watching him.

“Yes, lady, I have wandered many miles.

The roads don’t care how those who walk them look.  
They’ll take most any foot, banker’s or bum’s.”

“What do you want here?” Dora brusquely asked.

“Right down to business,” said the man. “Well, then.  
I come from out west, from the desert lands.

I’m used to being hot and dry, but still  
I’d be obliged to make use of your well.

A drink, a little rest, just till it cools,  
And I’ll be on my way. And by the sun  
That pulls the good sweat out of working hides,  
I hope, ma’am, you won’t be afraid of me.”

With proud disdain she drew herself up tall.

“Afraid! Friend, I’ve no time to be afraid  
Of every bug that crawls around my foot.”

“Well, there!” the man cried. “Now you’ve called  
me ‘friend!’

And doesn’t this old world look sweet again!  
I might remind you, friend, in friendly fashion,  
That friends don’t let a friend go off half-starved.”  
He grinned and added slyly, “I can work.”

The frown she’d readied quickly disappeared.

“Oh, you can work?” “And gladly,” he replied.

“Once I’ve filled up my belly with good food.

You can’t expect a man to work his best  
When he’s as hollow as a soldier’s drum.”

She smiled. “All right. There’s work to do,  
and plenty.

No, don’t go in until you’ve had a wash.



You stay right here. My father will soon come,  
He'll tell you what needs doing." One last look,  
Then Dora went into the house. The man  
Grinned, clapped his filthy hands and hummed  
a tune,

Then danced some shuffling steps upon the boards.  
He wandered to the well, drew out the pail,  
And settled down to scrub away the dirt.

The father was surprised to see a stranger,  
But shook his hand and led him in to eat.  
The three sat down, the stranger ate, and ate,  
And ate some more, peas, bread, and roasted chicken.  
When they had eaten, he began to work,  
Worked hard, worked cleverly, did all as told,  
And whistled while he swung the great sharp scythe.  
Sometimes, but not too often, he stretched out  
His back and arms, or wiped a cloth across  
His brow, although he never seemed to sweat.  
The father said, "You work hard, but don't sweat.  
Why's that?" The summer wanderer replied,  
"The sun and I are old and solid friends.  
He'd never hurt me, mister, for he loves  
The tales I tell. And I have lots of tales."  
"What sort of tales?" the father, grinning, asked.  
"Why, tales about what goes on in the night,"  
The man replied, "things that old sun don't see  
And couldn't see, him being round the world  
When night comes on. He sees fine in the day,  
Of course, and sees it all, even that that's hid,  
But what he wouldn't give to catch a glimpse  
Of what goes on here once he's turned his back!  
Well, I know what goes on, and tell him all.  
He likes his gossip just as much as us."

They worked all afternoon, and Dora cooked





The supper for the two hard-working men.  
There came a knocking as she stirred the soup  
And Martha entered. "Dora, here I am!"  
"Come in!" called Dora. "What is that you've got?"  
"I baked these pastries and I had some extra."  
"Why, aren't you sweet to bring them! Thank  
you, dear!  
Come in and talk to me while I make supper.  
Or is it too hot for you by the stove?"  
"I'm fine," said Martha, sitting. "But my word!  
So many pots and pans. Soup—that smells good—  
Tomato? Ham and fresh corn, noodles too—  
Have you and your good papa turned to bears?"  
She laughed, and Dora laughed with her. It was  
The first laugh she had laughed in many days.  
"No, no, but we've another mouth to feed."  
Unthinking, Martha cried out, "Has he come?"  
Then covered her mouth with a hand, ashamed.  
Her back to Martha, Dora only paused  
An instant slipping corn into a pot.  
She casually answered, "Has who come?  
My husband? Pet, you know he won't be back  
Till winter. No, this feast's to celebrate,  
Because we've found someone to work for us."  
"You've hired someone?" "Yes, and just in time.  
You know I've worried. Papa works too hard,  
And though he won't admit it, he's not young.  
I help as much as I am able to,  
But he's such pride, he doesn't like when I  
Must help him in the fields. Well, just today  
A man showed up, a vagrant from the west.  
He wanted water and a bite to eat,  
And since I gave him lunch, he's gone to work.  
He's out there in the field with papa now.



That's why I'm cooking up a proper feast—  
So he will stay," said Dora. "He will stay,"  
She firmly added, "I'll make sure of that,  
At least until we get the harvest in."  
"Why, then, it's fortunate I brought these cakes,"  
Said Martha brightly. "They can act as bait!"  
The two friends laughed together, and just then  
The father and the wanderer came in.  
"That's quite a welcome for a hungry man,  
The laughter of a pretty—pardon me!  
*Two* pretty women laughing fit to bust!"  
The vagrant made a genteel bow to Martha,  
Who, startled, paled, then blushed, then  
                    quickly stood.  
"Hello there, Martha girl!" the father called.  
"Just think, we got a whole field cut and stacked!  
This fellow has an arm, I'll tell you that,  
It's poetry to watch him at his work,  
Yes, poetry, I tell you. Well, we're starved!  
What's in this basket? Pastries! They're from you,  
I'd bet that, Martha. Sweet things from a sweet,"  
He laughed. The vagabond tossed her a grin,  
And Martha, flustered, didn't say a word.  
"It's kind of her to bring them," Dora said.  
The father said, "You'll stay to supper, too?"  
"Oh, yes!" said Dora. "Stay with us to eat."  
One blush had scarcely faded from her cheeks  
Before another burned poor Martha's face.  
"No, no, I mustn't! Mother's waiting.... 'Bye!"  
She carefully slipped passed the wanderer,  
Who scarcely made a hint to step aside,  
Skipped through the door, then spun and looked  
                    at him  
Full in the face, and he grinned back at her.



Again she whispered, “Bye!” and ran away.

“Well, it *is* getting late,” said Dora. “Come,”  
She said to the big man. “*You’ll* stay at least.  
And not just for the supper that you’ve earned.”  
The father, puzzled, looked at Dora then.  
She sat him down, and, businesslike, turned to  
The wandering man. “Hear what I have to say.  
We’ll give you three good, filling meals a day,  
A soft bed, and a roof against the rain,  
If you will stay and work for us, at least  
Until the harvest. So. What do you say?”  
The wanderer, still looking out the door,  
Turned round and smiled a pleasant smile at them.  
“Well, I’m nobody. Just a worthless bum.  
Four walls have never meant too much to me.  
I’m used to bedding down right on the ground,  
And as for roofs, the sky’s been fine for me.”  
Discouraged, Dora turned back to the stove.  
The vagrant added, in appeasing tones,  
“But then, I’m kind of lazy, that’s a fact,  
Yes, pretty lazy, and I like my naps.  
The breeze I’m feeling here is like a song,  
It’s sort of like a lullaby to me.  
It makes me drowsy, makes me want to see  
Just how soft that soft bed you have might be.  
I tell you, washing up and being clean  
Is something new and pleasing to me. And  
I smell that good smell coming from the stove,  
And those cakes in the basket sure look good.”  
Again he cast his glance out through the door.  
“Well, well... I’ll stay.” But at the leap of triumph  
He saw in Dora’s face, he raised his hand.  
“But just as long as I can feel that breeze  
And hear that song. When it’s gone, so am I.



So then, are you agreeable to that?"  
She thanked the wanderer with a quick nod.  
The father and the vagrant loudly laughed  
And shook each other's hand to make the deal.  
The father shouted, "Well, sit down, my friend!  
This good food will taste all the better now."  
But still the vagrant stood, expectantly,  
Till Dora said politely, "Please sit down."

The winter days pass slowly, for one longs  
That their dark hours should give way to some sun.  
The summer days pass slowly, for one longs  
Their droning, lazy heat should never end.  
"If only days like this would never end!"  
Betina sighed, not noticing the cloud  
That covered Dora's face at her light words.  
They sat upon the porch while shelling peas,  
Watched how the sun swung lower to the west,  
Its beams now reddening the snow that capped  
The mountain top until it seemed to blaze.  
Betina said, suggestively, "I guess  
Our Martha might be wishing that as well.  
She's recently been visiting you so much,  
I hear, eh, Dora? Well, she has her reasons,  
And one of them, I think, has a black beard."  
She chuckled, cracked a pod, and flicked a row  
Of peas into the bowl, *rat-tat-tat-tat*.  
"If that proud tower has fallen, good for her.  
She was well on her way to being a prude.  
The boys in town, they think she thought herself  
Too good for them. Well, now that's done and past.  
Why did she never have a beau before?  
There's plenty wished it, and she's pert and neat."  
Betina sighed. "I'm glad she's found some joy.  
She can't make fun of me, not anymore.



I'm glad for her, yes, though it can't last long.  
These wandering men, they're not like me and her.  
They never can rest easy. Jittery,  
That's what they are, and always on the go,  
Too eager to see what lies round the bend.  
And probably that's what we like in them,  
We who are bound to stay knit to one place.  
Well, I, at least, am grateful for the dears."  
She noticed then how Dora had gone quiet,  
And set her bowl of peas and pods aside.  
"My goodness, sunset! What time is it, Dora?  
I've gabbed away an hour! My aunt will scold."  
She stood and put her bonnet on her head,  
Bent down and pecked a kiss at Dora's cheek,  
"Goodbye, dear!" hurried down the step. But then  
She turned, ran back, and gave her a quick hug  
And murmured softly in her ear, "Dear Dora,  
Don't pay me any mind. You know too well  
I'm just a silly, empty-headed nit.  
Words leap out of my mouth without a thought.  
Remember, he'll come back just as he said.  
He didn't want to go, that much was plain,  
And he'll come back, and we'll all share your joy."  
She kissed her once again. "Now I must fly!  
Until tomorrow morning at the church!"

Till it was almost twilight, Dora sat  
And watched the road down which Betina went.  
Her face changed every moment, now hard, tense,  
Now weary, tenderly touched with a smile.  
She sat thus till a distant calling told  
The coming of her father. "Dora, dear!"  
He shouted, stepping from behind the house.  
"Oh, there you are. We've done a good day's work."  
"And where's the hired man?" she asked, surprised.



“He’s washing up?” The father sat by her,  
Picked up the bowl Betina had set by.  
He riffled fingers through the clattering peas,  
Picked out a pod, and split it with a nail.  
“He’s washing up, yes, girl, but not for us.  
Tonight set just two places at the table.”  
She said, “He doesn’t want his supper, then?”  
He laughed. “I don’t think supper’s on his mind.  
We settled folks may talk of right and wrong,  
But these young folks, they have their own ideas.”  
He stood and took her bowl along with his.  
“Come on, let’s get our supper.” He went in,  
But Dora stayed a moment on the porch,  
Stared at the mountain with a sad desire.

The summer nights rolled on, filled with perfume  
Of gladiolus, jasmine, hellebore;  
Filled with the shrills of crickets, hoots of owls,  
The *plup* of the night-heron, chirps of frogs;  
And in the meadows, hid from judging eyes,  
Filled with soon-broken lovers’ promises;  
As ever was, is, and should ever be.

Until one morning came the wanderer  
To Dora and her father at their table,  
His few things bundled in a too-small knot.  
“Sit down,” said Dora. “You’ve slept late today.”  
“Yes,” said the father, “Breakfast’s going cold,  
But there’s the coffee hot upon the stove.”  
The wandering man, however, kept his feet.  
“I have to say no to your cooking now,  
Good as it is, Miss Dora, even though  
My stomach’s telling me, ‘Don’t be a fool.’  
It’s time for me to go, and so I quit.”  
“But why?” the others, shocked, demanded. “Why?”  
“You didn’t feel it?” said the wanderer.



“Last night the breeze turned, spun round from  
the north.

That lullaby’s become a bugle call.

I hear the drums. They’re telling me to march.

You’re not like me, not like a vagabond.

We’re sensitive to all these little signs.

The weather’s turned, I feel the coming cold.

It’s like I told you that first day I came,

I’ll work until the breeze tells me to go.

And I won’t eat if I can’t earn my meals.

You’ve both been kind to me, and you’ve my thanks,

But that road’s jealous, and it wants me back.

So, then... goodbye.” He turned round. Dora said,

“But what about—?” She didn’t dare say more.

The man turned back to her and gave a grin.

“About what? Eh?” The bearded face grew soft.

“I wouldn’t worry, missus, on that score.

You either know or learn about the world,

And what you learn from love, mad, glad, or sad,

Will always be a treasure in the mind.

So cheer yourself, like I do! The wind’s changed!

It’s blowing colder from the distant north!

Old summer’s heading out, and so am I!”

He kicked the door and swiftly marched away.

From then on Martha didn’t often call,

Or calling, didn’t, couldn’t stay too long,

But from that day she and Betina both

More kindly listened to the wooing words

The young men of the village cast at them.

A short while later Dora gladly heard

The news that her friends both were now engaged,

And laughed with them, and listened to their dreams.

They planned the weddings late into the night,

And later, in the evening walking home



From talk of cakes and dresses, Dora raised  
Her face up to the glowing sky to search  
The coming of the promised northern breeze,  
The breeze that would bring winter, and her love.







## VI

The autumn crept into the little town  
Disguised by a bright sun and a fresh breeze.  
“Ah!” said the Widow Quiligos, and leaned  
To catch the breeze upon her smiling cheeks.  
“Now, isn’t that refreshing? At my age,  
I have to say, the summer’s heat can weigh.”  
She smiled at Dora, who smiled back and said,  
“You’re always going on about your age,  
But honestly, you know you’re not so old.”  
The widow thoughtfully regarded her.  
“You do surprise me, Dora, yes, because  
It’s not so very long ago you thought  
Me elderly. It’s plain that marriage makes  
A girl grow up. I wonder if it will  
Make them grow up, your friends, Betina, Martha,  
Who still act like two children playing house.”  
“I think they’ve done some growing up already,”  
Said Dora. “Martha’s long been serious,  
Or serious enough for a young girl,  
Betina, though...” They chuckled comfortably  
While knitting in the cozy sitting room  
Of Widow Quiligos’s little house.  
The Widow let her laughing die away  
And in her eyes a far look softly came.



“But then, I *am* old, yes, indeed I am.  
I feel the rushing by of each new year,  
Of each month and each season and each breath,  
As if it were a footfall on the step.  
If my poor husband were still here, you’d see  
How young I might have stayed! Oh... solitude.  
Do you feel that way?” Suddenly she dropped  
Her needles to her lap and looked at Dora,  
Who, startled, stared and felt her cheeks grow hot.  
She looked down at her hands, did not respond.  
The Widow tenderly said, “Yes, I see.  
But you won’t stay alone, dear, not for long.  
Your man can come back to you. He will.  
You’re like a sailor’s bride, and though it’s hard,  
You’ll have the joy of seeing him again.”  
Tears touched her eyes, and tears touched Dora’s, too.  
She cried out, “Will he come? Oh, will he come?”  
She covered her face with a hand. The Widow  
Reached out and touched her arm. “But do  
you doubt?  
Are you afraid? You needn’t be, my dear.  
Your husband’s good and faithful, dutiful,  
It’s proved by how he’s gone to help his kin,  
And more than all of that, he loves you so,  
We saw it in him, saw it in the way  
He always looks at you. Oh, can you doubt?  
We don’t doubt, nor can you. Now, dry those tears,”  
She handed her lace hankie to her friend.  
“He wouldn’t want to see you in this state,  
He couldn’t bear to do his duty there  
If he should know you waver here in yours.”  
“You’re right,” sniffed Dora. “I’m ashamed,  
ashamed.”  
“Don’t be ashamed!” the Widow quickly said.



“It’s natural that fear should test our faith.  
There’s not a woman in this sad old world  
Who hasn’t born what we’ve born, and far worse.  
Fear comes, we face it down, and that is that.”  
She stuck her needles in the ball of yarn.  
“And now we’ve worked enough. Let’s have  
some tea.”

The days then secretly grew shorter, each  
A moment less, another moment less.  
The sun pretended it would always shine  
As hot as it did at an August noon.  
The autumn rain itself did not disrupt  
The haying or the harvest of the corn.  
The crops did well, and all the stores were filled.  
Because the father worked again alone,  
Young Dora worked beside him all the day.  
They mowed the grain and piled it up to dry,  
Then threshed it, cleaned it, then they winnowed it.  
At dawn each morning Dora harvested  
The garden produce: carrots, beans, and cabbage,  
Potatoes, turnips, onions, peppers, squash.  
At night, as weary as she was, she worked  
To clean and can the harvest, dry the herbs.  
She made a jelly of the quince that grew  
Beside the kitchen door. The peppers went  
In vinegar with mustard seeds and salt.  
The beans were dried and carefully put by,  
The carrots, beets, and cucumbers were canned,  
The cabbage was fermented in a crock.  
She never went to bed till after ten,  
And woke at dawn to start the work again.  
She worked until exhaustion, and was glad,  
Because exhaustion meant she would not dream.  
She worked until exhaustion every day



With joy, for every day meant one day less  
Until the promised coming of her love.

One brassy autumn morning there appeared  
In town an unknown traveler, middle-aged,  
Short, somewhat stooped, thin, with a gray mustache.  
His clothing, even by the local fashion,  
Was out of date, worn thin, and patched all over  
With gaily covered cloths of any kind  
That came to hand when a new hole appeared.  
His new boots, though, were shiny black.

There gleamed  
A polished silver buckle on his belt,  
And underneath their tufted brows, his eyes  
Shone black as onyx polished to a sheen.  
“My boots?” he answered one suspicious soul.  
“Brand new, and thanks for noticing them, sir.  
This hat with its broad brim is new as well.  
The two necessities of a wise man,  
Good shoes and hat, just as a sturdy house  
Requires a good foundation and solid roof.  
Take my advice, I’ve learned the lesson well:  
In these affairs too much frugality  
Is Simon-simple prodigality.  
I’m not so rich nor so poor for such waste.  
I’ve cultivated prudence through the years,  
It’s served me well, whatever land I’m in.  
That’s why I’m here, sir, in your lovely town.  
I’m searching for a berth in which to lodge,  
Some domicile respectable and clean  
And not so costly as the local inn.  
But don’t mistake me, I’m no mendicant,  
I happily can pay for bed and board  
In some nice, tranquil, neat and private home,  
Without too many children underfoot—



Though I love children, they do tend to noise.  
So, can you tell me of a likely place?  
Is there in your town someone so inclined  
To take a genteel lodger for a time?  
Down this way? Thank you, sir, good day to you!"

That's how he came to Widow Quiligos.  
"What's this?" she asked, astonished. "Take  
a boarder?

I've never even thought of such a thing!"  
The traveler politely bowed to her.  
"And will you think about it now, dear lady?  
I'll gladly pay a fair price for a bed  
For some few days, or even some few weeks.  
Your town, so quaint and pretty, speaks to me,  
I'd like to stay to see the harvest fair,  
Observe the local customs and conventions,  
And delve into your population's soul.  
You see, I'm a philosopher of sorts.  
No, no one famous, my dear lady, no!  
I never would presume to offer up  
Some dense *tractatus* in a long-dead tongue.  
I'm but a student of the human state.  
Through my peregrinations round this globe  
I've made my explorations in each burg,  
Each town, each hovel, seeking out the thread  
That links us all in shared humanity.  
And from that study, unmethodical  
As it has been, I readily discern  
That you, ma'am, are in no way commonplace."  
The Widow Quiligos regarded him  
Suspiciously. "Sir, you're a flatterer."  
"No, not at all, dear lady!" he exclaimed.  
"I'm too old, too experienced for such tricks.  
He smiled. "But these two world-worn eyes remark



Your neat, well-furnished sitting room. This nose  
Takes note of tasty odors from your kitchen.  
This heart, schooled in high roads and low, can sense  
Your obvious respectability,  
Which is of more importance than the rest.”

The villagers were soon surprised to hear  
That Widow Quiligos had started up  
A boarding-house at reasonable rates.

Still Dora labored to bring in the grapes,  
The vegetables, to can and dry and save.  
The father filled the wagon up with wood,  
Again, again, to haul it to the house.  
The poor horse, sway-backed, old, strained at  
the load,

With Dora at the halter, guiding her,  
Not with a whip, but with kind, urging words.  
“Look at those clouds,” the father said one day.  
“We’ve got to hurry. Soon we’ll see first frost.  
I feel it creeping down the mountainside.”  
“Yes, papa,” Dora said. “Come on, love, pull!  
Just take one step, and then another. There,  
Look, there’s your stable, where you’ll have  
your rest.”

The old horse snorted, withers chafed, her flanks  
Spumed dense with sweat, her nostrils flared  
and puffing.

At last they reached the dusty farmyard, where  
She trembled when the halter was removed.  
Too tired to move, to even nuzzle oats.

“She’s old, too old for such work,” Dora said.  
“We need to let her have her last years’ peace.”  
“I know,” the father said. “We’ve earned it, both.  
And soon we’ll have our rest, but not just yet.  
Let’s get this wood stacked, night is coming on.”



They piled the winter's fuel till after dark,  
Next morning, too. So every day was spent.

"And how's your bridegroom doing?" asked  
the Widow

As she and Martha sat upon her porch  
One sunny afternoon embroidering  
On napkins for Betina's wedding gift.  
"Men!" Martha cried, and dropped her hoop  
and needle.

"I'll never understand them! Boys grown tall!  
He's scared, yes, scared of getting married now!  
Not scared of marriage, but of getting married.  
He says, 'I won't remember all the words,  
I'll trip, or I'll get tipsy at the feast.'  
Does that sound like a man who's been to war?  
I always thought we women were the cowards,  
But even papa said he almost fled  
When it came time to marry mama. Huh!"

"Well, Martha," said the Widow, "bravery  
In combat is a game that they must play.  
It's we who must make courage every day.  
For men in war face only other men,  
But we, we must face men and life as well."  
A sharp nod showed that Martha quite agreed.  
Then, taking up her sewing once again,  
She innocently, cunningly (she thought),  
Inquired, "And how is your insistent boarder?"

"Oh, Martha!" said the Widow eagerly,  
"He really is the most amazing man!  
So elegant, so erudite, so wise,  
A man of taste, it's clear. Of course he's poor,  
That's common for a devotee of learning.  
It's no reflection on his inner worth,  
And being poor's no sin, indeed it's not,



I hope I'm not so shallow to think that!  
And yet he always pays without delay.  
You know, financially I'm well enough—  
Thanks to my husband! He took care of that.  
But I won't say the rent can't help a bit.  
We often have a nice talk after supper...  
Well, he talks, and I'm happy just to hear  
The fascinating tales he has to tell.  
It seems he's traveled almost everywhere—  
Not as a bum, as a philosopher,  
'A student of the human state,' he says.  
Well, practically every word's pure gold,  
He speaks as well as any senator,  
And better than most preachers I have heard.  
You know, at first I didn't think it proper  
To have a strange man living in the house—  
What would our people say?—but now I'm glad.  
He's brought me more than money, that's the truth."  
"I'm happy for the both of you," said Martha.  
"But I suspect you've given as you've got,  
With your good cooking and housekeeping skills.  
He looks as though he's gained a little bulk."  
"He *was* thin when he came," the Widow sighed.  
"Oh, dear!" said Martha. "Now I'd only wish  
That every man who wandered into town  
Could bring as much advantage to us all!"  
The Widow Quiligos gave her a glance,  
Then made a complicated pistil stitch.  
"I saw our Dora yesterday," she said.  
"She's working far too much, she looks so tired.  
Of course, farm work at harvest's always hard,  
So much to do before the weather changes.  
However, she told me she's glad to see  
That autumn's almost done. We all know why."





The younger woman caught her elder's hint,  
Took up her needle, and began to sew.

The old horse foundered, and for several days  
The father left his chores undone while he  
And Dora tended to the suffering beast.  
But all their work was vain. They couldn't bear  
To see her pain, and had to put her down.  
"She was a faithful horse," the father said.  
He wiped his eyes with his old handkerchief.  
"It hurts me. But we don't have time to grieve.  
Come, Dora. There's still much work to be done  
Before we're set for winter, and somehow  
We two will have to finish it. Now come."  
They then themselves worked like draft animals,  
And dragged the wagon to and from the fields.

There were two marriages to celebrate,  
Betina's first, and Martha's followed fast,  
Both solemnized before the harvest feast.  
The townsfolk all came in their Sunday best,  
And Widow Quiligos's lodger, too,  
Who watched it all enthusiastically.  
"I love to see these country rituals,  
The ancient customs of a simple faith.  
The pretty dresses, and the song and dance,  
And then the wondrous food! It's here one finds  
The *verum fundamentum* of the land."  
The Widow Quiligos said proudly, "Yes,  
In our old festivals we feel as if  
Our ancestors are sitting at our side  
And raising up a glass to toast the young."  
The lodger wisely brushed his thick mustache,  
Picked up a tiny cake from off his plate  
And wisely bit into it. "Quite profound,  
Dear Widow Quiligos, profound indeed.



You have within your breast a poet's soul."

Then, three days later, Dora's father fell  
Upon a little hill while tugging at  
The loaded wagon, which began to roll.  
He raised an arm to try to shield himself,  
But one large wooden wheel caught hold of him,  
And as a millstone crushes autumn grain,  
The wagon crushed his leg and hip. He screamed.  
Down in the garden, Dora heard his cries.  
She ran up to the field and saw the blood.  
With all the strength of panic she seized hold  
And dragged the loaded wagon off of him.  
But then, alone, what could she do? Should she  
Stay with him as he clutched at her and raved  
With pain, or should she run to fetch the doctor?  
Blood jetted from her father's wounded leg.  
Deciding quickly, Dora ripped a strip  
Of fabric from her skirt, quick found the vein  
Beneath the slick flesh pulsing, pressed it tight,  
And firmly bound it. Quashing her own gasps,  
She spoke as calmly as her fear allowed.  
"Oh papa, can you hear me? Do you hear?  
No, hush, dear! Listen. I must find some help.  
I'll find the doctor. Listen to me, do!  
I've stopped the bleeding, now I have to go.  
I won't be long, I'll run fast as I can.  
Look at me! You must keep awake! You hear?  
Don't let yourself faint. You are a strong man,  
Be strong now, be strong for us both. Yes, scream!  
Scream, if that means you keep awake. Don't fail!  
I will be back soon!" Then she kissed his brow,  
While fearing that it was a farewell kiss,  
And ran far faster than she'd ever run.  
She did not cry. She had no breath for tears.



Not far along the road she found some friends,  
Quick told them everything. One of the men  
Instead ran to the town to find some help.  
The others raced back to the farm with Dora.  
The three there lifted up the wounded man,  
Who fainted at the jolt, and carried him  
Into the house and laid him on his bed.

At last the doctor came and cleaned the wounds,  
Sewed up the severed artery, poured out  
A sedative, explored the broken bones.  
“You acted smartly, Dora,” said the doctor.  
“Your quick thought saved his life. He would  
have died

In minutes if you’d not bound up that leg.”  
“But how’s his leg?” she asked. “It’s twisted so.”  
The doctor did not offer her vain hope.  
“The leg, it might be saved. But with that hip,  
We can’t expect that he... well, we must wait.  
We’ll wait and see. Your father’s a strong man,  
You know, and I have been surprised before.”

So Dora nursed her father; not alone.  
Her friends came often to sit at his bed  
While Dora took an hour or two of sleep.  
The father, for his pain, could not lie still,  
He moaned and cried out unexpectedly,  
But Martha calmly sat, his hand in hers,  
Beside the bed and read to him aloud.  
The father rarely and too little ate.  
Betina brought him good, strong bowls of broth  
And patiently she fed him like a child.  
Two brothers from the village brought their horse  
And finished bringing in the winter’s wood,  
And stacked it up, too. Dora thanked them all  
Without a word, because words can’t contain



So much of gratitude in their small space.  
At night, alone beside her father's bed,  
She'd raise her eyes from his strained, clutching hand,  
Look through the window to the mountain peak  
That still concealed her only, last, loved hope.

The lodger, without prelude, said one day,  
“Dear Widow Quiligos, the time has come.  
I feel the winter menacing my joints,  
So I'll be on my way, as is my wont,  
Towards the south and more forgiving lands.  
I've watched your little dramas with great interest,  
They were diverting for the probing mind,  
Instructive, yes indeed, and I've learned much,  
Or should I say, confirmed past postulates.  
I do assure you, Widow Quiligos,  
In all my journeys through this varied world  
I never have experienced a home  
So comfortable and pleasing as your own,  
Nor any hostess charming as yourself.  
Please, do not press or tempt me to delay.  
Although my tongue and stomach contradict  
With memories of your divine cuisine.  
I am, as I have said, a philosophe.  
We pride ourselves on being ever free,  
And so I am no slave to appetite.  
Dear lady, now farewell. Farewell, sweet town!  
And when an autumn wind blows from the north,  
I only ask you think kind thoughts of me!  
For I, wherever I may chance to be,  
In autumn I will surely think of you!”  
The Widow Quiligos watched wordlessly  
Until his slender form had gone from view,  
Then gave a sudden start: a flake of snow  
Had slipped unseen down from the sky and touched



The tip of her nose like a whisper. "Oh!"  
She murmured. "Winter! And so early! My!"  
She sniffed proleptically and rushed inside.

But Dora, who was dozing in her chair,  
One hand held tightly in her father's grip,  
Woke suddenly from an unpleasant dream  
Of suffocating and oppressive heat.  
Perplexed, she glanced down at her father's face,  
Pale and exhausted, drawn in drowsing pain.  
She, drawn, exhausted, tenderly caressed  
The graying hair and pushed it from his eyes.  
She raised her head and looked up at the window.

She gasped. No, what she saw was only dust.  
Perhaps reflections of a dove's white plumes.  
Then, unbelieving, Dora leaped and ran  
Out of the room and to the door. She threw  
It open, hastened out onto the porch  
Bare-footed underneath the twilight sky,  
A twilight sky swift filling with pale flakes.  
She gave herself up to the welcome chill,  
Accepted eagerly each icy sting,  
Grasped eagerly each dancing spot of white,  
Licked at the silver air, began to laugh.

Then she fell silent. Looking through the snow,  
She saw the jutting, jealous mountaintop.  
Unthinking, she stretched out her arms and cried,  
"Oh, give him back! Oh, give him back to me!"

A call came back to her from out the snow.  
She saw a shape there past the shifting veil.  
Her bare feet raced her down the path to him,  
Felt neither stone nor cold nor snow nor dust.

He came out of the snow just as a star  
Fights through a cloud to light a frightful night.  
He caught her up and lifted her and kissed



And said, "I promised you, and now I've come."  
She gasped, she wept, she laughed, she said to him,  
"You promised me, and now you've come to me."  
And with the last rays of the dying sun  
The snow about them turned to shining gold.





## VII

For Dora now, her doubt and her despair  
No longer mattered. Her love had come home,  
He was here, he would stay, no more would she  
Be forced to bear her burdens all alone.  
He, hearing the sad story that she told him,  
Kissed off her tears and whispered, "I am here,  
I'm here now with you, love. You're not alone."  
But saying this, he cast a secret glance  
Back to the roadway, where a tall, thin form  
That wore a broken stovepipe hat dissolved  
Into a vortex of wind-driven snow.  
"We'll be together," said the well-beloved,  
"As long as possible, we will, I swear.  
Until—" She stopped his murmurs with a kiss.  
The father, through his pain, also rejoiced.  
"He came, I said he'd come, there, didn't I?"  
He gasped at the sharp rasp of bone on bone.  
"He is a good man, you can count on him,  
I always said we're right to trust in him."  
"I always trusted," Dora, simply, said.  
"But oh my love, the waiting was so hard."  
"He's here now," said the father, "now all's well."  
He wheezed and slipped to drowsing. "All's  
well now."



That night, when they had reaffirmed their vows  
Through touch and kiss, he whispered to his wife,  
“On nights like this, so cold, up on the mountain,  
I only thought of you, of you, my wife.  
I saw you through the clouds wishing me home,  
And cursed my wanting for deceiving me.  
I smelled you in each breeze that blew from here,  
And I was jealous of them, for they’d touched you.  
I even railed against the killing sun,  
Because I’ve known your light, and its weak rays  
Are nothing to the living heat of you.  
The flowers there—for there are flowers there,  
But haggard, rimy flowers, discouraging—  
They bud too early, and too quickly wilt,  
And yet I wished them wilted sooner still,  
So I could leave and hurry back to you,  
My wife, my love, my reason now to be.”  
The wind that rattled at the windowpane  
Seemed then to sadly laugh at all he said.

But every day the husband rose to work.  
He split the logs and fed the cow and goat.  
He spread manure on the sleeping fields  
To fortify them for the coming crops,  
And some time later cast the winter seed  
To make an early harvest in the spring.  
He did not tell her, did not need to say  
That he himself would not take in that crop.  
He made a new wheel for the broken wagon.  
He fixed the fractured windows in the house  
To keep the snooping winter wind outside.

And Dora daily nursed her broken father,  
Who daily grew more feeble and more dazed.  
She pleaded to him: he should eat and hope.  
She tried to cheer him with the village talk.





She read aloud to him until he dozed,  
Still groaning even in his tortured sleep,  
And when, at night, he cried out from his room,  
She left her own warm bed and warming love  
To run to him and hold his trembling hand  
Until again he wandered into sleep.  
The father did not leave his bed again.  
His crushed leg shrank and withered, and his hip,  
Smashed, twisted, bleeding still, refused to heal.  
His mind, from agony and weariness,  
Began to wander in some nightmare-land  
Whose skies were streaked with jagged stripes of red,  
In which the sweetest memories were split  
And fractured by the never-ending pain.  
Now Dora's patient touch and caring kiss  
Could only for a short time draw him back  
To his real room and something like to peace.  
Then, for the few brief hours without his screams,  
She'd rush into her husband's strong embrace,  
And somehow his embrace gave her new life,  
New strength, new courage for the next outcry.  
Deep in the night, in bed, their lovers' talk  
Drowned out the pressing plaint of wind and storm.

Though they were newly wedded, Martha and  
Betina often came to see their friend.  
The three would cook together, sew together,  
Discuss the strangeness of their new estate.  
"This being married is the strangest thing,"  
Betina said. "And it too obviously  
Was fabricated for the benefit  
Of men and men alone, that's what I say.  
My Marcus thinks I should be standing by,  
Prepared to serve him when he says, "Hop to!"  
As if I were some chambermaid, and this



The man who swore he'd always be my slave!  
I can't see where he learned such silly stuff.  
I don't believe his mother raised him so.  
My mother's always said and always says  
These men live in some sort of fantasy.  
That's why they go on so that only they  
Can understand the world and have to rule,  
That we poor women cannot manage things,  
Are too emotional and don't have sense—  
They're only trying to convince themselves.  
They know that we'd fix everything at once  
With time to spare, and leave them looking fools.  
Well, you won't see me falling for his bunk.  
I'll break and bridle him, see if I won't."  
"But dear Betina," Martha said, amused,  
"We all know Marcus idolizes you!"  
"And why not?" said Betina soberly,  
Which started merry laughter from the others.  
Betina also chuckled. "Well, at least  
He is a handsome fellow, and he tells  
Such funny stories, and as for the rest...  
I guess we fit together pretty well."  
"My man and I fit well together, too,"  
Said Martha. "Yes, my Isaac's so attentive,  
He's always doing little things to please,  
And always coddling me. Perhaps too much.  
What does he think I am, a china doll?  
Sometimes he treats me as if I would break  
If he spoke loud or gave a nasty look.  
Of course, that's better than poor Sarah's life,  
Tied down forever to that stupid brute,  
Or Mrs. Shaw, imprisoned with a drunk.  
But couldn't there be some nice middle way?  
Here I am, healthy, strong, robust, and young.



I don't want to be packed in tissue paper  
And put away upon some closet shelf!"  
"Away from that sweet western wind that once  
So perked you up and made your cheeks so pink!"  
Betina laughed. And Martha quickly said,  
"And what if Marcus finds you lured away  
By some spring wind that's blowing from the south?"  
They both laughed for a time, then looked across  
At Dora, who was smiling, sadly wise.  
"Oh, friends," she said, "I hope you understand  
That all your little woes are blessings too.  
Because those you complain of do love you,  
And are with you, will always be with you."  
She laid her folded hands down in her lap,  
Looked out the frost-rimed window at the sun  
Whose feeble winter glow scarce lit the ground,  
And listened for the *tump-tump* of the axe  
Her husband swung somewhere behind the house.  
The others glanced at one another, both  
Reached out to softly touch her folded hands.  
At their touch, Dora started, looked at them,  
And said, "Oh, don't feel sorry for me, friends!  
My man is all my joy, and if he brings  
Some sorrow with him, that's small price to pay.  
I welcome it and bless it in my heart.  
The world's so generous to give to me  
A man like him! So I won't ask for more.  
I only hope I'm strong enough for him."  
Astonished, the two new brides did not speak.  
The Widow Quiligos paid calls as well,  
More often than the busy younger women.  
She often sat beside the father's bed  
And spoke with him until he'd fall asleep,  
But if he heard or not, she did not know.



She helped to tidy up the house, so long  
Neglected for the troubles that had come,  
And when, ashamed, poor Dora gave her thanks,  
She lightly said, "What else have I to do?  
There's no one now who needs me in my home.  
In fact, the lodger made me realize  
How empty is my solitary life.  
I had become content with idleness,  
Too comfortable, and too self-satisfied.  
Should one just sit and watch the world? Oh, no!  
One must stand up and push oneself outside  
And into human sociability.  
I think I've picked up some of his big words!  
At least, some of his wise philosophy.  
It is our duty to be neighborly,  
And for our friends, dear Dora, such as you  
That duty is a pleasure gladly done.  
Oh, darling, why those tears? You stop that now.  
It's *you* who help *me*, letting me help you.  
I get to prove I'm not some useless biddy,  
And helping here, I steal some of your youth.  
You're young, my dear, you're young, and  
you are loved.  
Enjoy that, child! Be glad in youth and love!  
For some will never know those joys again."  
Eyes shining, she turned to the door, for then  
The husband came inside. "And there he is!"  
The Widow cried. "And there the two dears are!  
I'll tuck this pretty picture in my pocket,  
The lovely bride and handsome, strong young groom,  
This memory will warm me going home."  
"I'll walk you home," the husband quickly said.  
"The road to town is long, and night falls fast."  
"Oh, not at all," the Widow said. "But thanks.



I like a good brisk walk with just my thoughts,  
And wouldn't like to think of Dora here  
Without you, dear." She wrapped her knitted shawl  
Tight round her shoulders, kissed them both  
goodbye,

Said quietly, "Good night!" and went away.

He watched her go and said, "You have  
good friends."

"*We* have good friends," she said, and went to him.

The new year came in darkness and in storm.  
The storm had covered all the roofs in ice  
And made the great trees brittle with its charge,  
Had brought down branches and cracked solid walls,  
Had blown off shingles and split window panes.  
The new sun in the morning, small but dazzling,  
Revealed the frosted ruin of the night.  
The people of the town did not indulge  
Their sorrow long, but straight began to work.  
They first repaired their roofs to guard their homes,  
And raised new chimneys from the fallen bricks.  
Then they repaired their stables, corncribs, barns,  
And then went out to help their friends and kin.  
While Dora stayed to nurse her father, her  
Young husband joined the other men to go  
From house to house, to chop the fallen trees,  
To hammer at the wounded walls and roofs,  
To cover broken windows up with boards.  
The Widow Quiligos invited in  
The gang of men for coffee scalding hot.  
Betina had baked cakes and little pies,  
And Martha cooked a stomach-filling stew.  
The village men and women gathered round  
And guessed at what the weather had in store,  
Conferred with one another what to do



About the cattle, horses, chickens, sheep,  
Consoled each other for their damages.  
The village children, though, who took no part  
In grown-up worries, played upon the ice,  
Slid round on sleds and skates or their behinds.  
Late in the day the husband came back home,  
Where Dora hugged him and gave him a kiss,  
And softly they exchanged each other's news,  
She of her father, he of his new friends.  
"I like to work with people," he declared.  
"It makes me feel I'm part of valley life,  
It makes me feel as though I'm one of you."  
She said, perplexed, "Of course you're one of us."  
"Because of you," he said. "Because of you."

The father, ever weaker from his pain,  
Began to cough with terrifying force.  
He coughed on waking, coughed while trying to eat,  
Coughed even when he slept, and woke himself.  
The cough scratched at the ears like some  
beast's claws.

Between the coughs his moaning never ceased.  
He ate but little, and drank even less.  
He understood no question, or would give  
An answer far from making any sense.  
He was so thin he barely made a mound  
Within the quilts that Dora piled on him  
To try to keep that frail, gaunt body warm.  
She bathed him tenderly with a soft cloth  
And watched his beard grow white. She didn't dare  
To try to shave his hollow, twitching face.  
Her husband watched all this without a word.  
Without a word he tried to hush her tears.

The days and nights passed this way. Suffering  
When shared can make the love shared grow as well.



“Without you, I would suffocate,” she said.  
“Without you,” he said, “I’d forget to breathe.”  
“Without you, winter’s cold would conquer me.”  
“Without you, there is only winter’s cold.”  
But secretly and separately they watched  
The daily setting of the sun at dusk,  
And secretly and separately despaired  
At every morning’s rising of the sun.

One brighter morning during that sad month  
Of January, in a stand of pine,  
The husband gathered branches in a stack  
And bound it round with a stout length of hemp.  
He straightened himself, turned to lift it up,  
And found the old man standing there, still wrapped  
In his worn overcoat. He wore the hat  
Crushed on one side, and a bright, friendly smile.

“My boy!” he cried. “Good morning and hello!  
How happy I am after such a time  
To see you once again, you thrill my eyes.  
We’ve missed you on the mountain, child, we do.  
It feels so very lonely with you gone.  
The winds are even asking, ‘Where’s your child?’  
Of course I have explained it all before,  
Too many, many times, but you know them,  
Forgetful, empty-headed things. The rocks  
And glaciers even groan because you’re gone,  
And patience is their custom, as you know.  
My, aren’t you looking fit and healthy! Good!  
I worry for you in this climate, child.

Well, won’t you say hello to me, my boy?”

Tight-lipped, the young man huffed, “Yes, hello,”  
Then quickly added, “But why have you come?”

“Is that a friendly way to greet me, son?”

The old man said, and sniffed, somewhat provoked.



"I only came to visit out of love,  
And such a long way, only out of love,  
To say hello... and, well, to warn you, too."  
"Ah," said the young man. "It's just as I thought.  
You've come to laugh at all my happiness,  
Because you're jealous of it, all alone!"  
The old man frowned and sadly looked away.  
"And is that what you really think of me...?"  
"Oh, Father!" cried the husband. "No, I don't!  
I'm sorry! I don't mean what I just said.  
His fine face scowled with truculent resolve.  
"But I won't give up all my happiness!"  
The old man said in kindly tones, "Dear boy,  
Real happiness would never need such words."

The young man seized his head in his two hands.  
"I'm so unhappy, Father! My dear wife,  
She suffers from her father's suffering,  
He's going to die, these valley people die.  
He'll die, and soon I'll have to go away,  
I do not want to go, but I must go,  
And then my love will too soon be alone!  
She knows this, but she dare not speak of it.  
Why do I have to leave her, Father? Why?"  
"You know well why," the old man quietly said.  
"I don't want to! I need to stay with her!"

The old man sat down on a pine tree stump.  
"My boy," he said, "you made your choice last year.  
You understood the choice, you freely chose,  
For even love is something one may choose,  
Although it seems an overpowering need.  
Because you let yourself be swept away,  
You only understood the consequence  
Of your choice in the mind, but now you feel  
It in your very body. Well, I warned,





I counseled you against this, didn't I?  
Because I, being older, understood  
The fearful agony of love denied.  
Don't look at me that way! Yes, this twig-thin,  
Old, withered body too once fell in love.  
That's how I learned the dreadful pain it gives,  
And maybe why I did not fight you more....  
Oh, if youth had the wisdom of old age!  
If youth could listen to experience!  
But youth can't see beyond its own desire,  
The fiery wanting of a moment's touch,  
Cannot conceive that feelings always pass.  
It will not see that time will not stand still.  
Well, you have chosen, boy, and here you are.  
But you," the old man said with sudden fire,  
"You have experienced real, living love!  
You face oppressive sorrow, yet your love  
Is even stronger now than at the first!  
And if your love can live through even this,  
You should know it can easily survive  
An absence of a few short, sunlit months."  
"I do not want to leave," the young man said,  
With sullen voice, his face set in a scowl.  
The old man kindly said, "But you will leave.  
You have to. You know this. For you yourself,  
For her, and for me, too. What would I do  
If you should leave me lonely in this world?  
Would you wish me to live in loneliness  
Without the hope that you'd come back to me?  
Whyever do you think I made you, son?  
You should know, more than one loves you,  
    dear boy."

The husband looked amazed at the old man,  
And suddenly and fiercely held him tight.



They sat like that for quite a little while.

At last the old man cleared his throat, stood up,  
And brusquely said, "Well, I've stayed here too long.  
This sun's unhealthy, turned my eyes quite red!  
Goodbye, my boy. Whatever comes, be well.  
Expect me when old Mother Winter ends.  
Till then, goodbye!" He kissed the boy's white cheek  
And disappeared in a bright flash of snow.

The husband stared a moment, then he stood,  
Took hold of the hemp cord and hoisted up  
The mass of kindling, placed it on his back,  
And slowly walked back home and to his love.





## VIII

The last day of the month of February,  
Frigid as only February can be,  
The father died. Just for a moment's time  
His eyes came open, tender reason shone.  
His hand moved, Dora caught it, pressed it tight.  
His own thin, twisted fingers held her own,  
Relaxed, and fell from hers. She whispered, "Father."  
She took his hand again, held it until  
It chilled to simple emptiness. She willed,  
But he did not return to that crushed shell.  
Her husband, come in from the barn, found her  
As still as that which lay upon the bed.  
He watched her long, afraid she did not breathe.  
At last her husband touched her, made her stand,  
Led her out of the room and to the hearth,  
Where warmth was. A long while they silent sat.  
He waited patiently until she spoke.  
And with her speaking, life began again.

The preparations for the rite were made.  
The village women washed the father's corpse,  
Then dressed it in his only suit of clothes.  
The village men chose boards from the old house,  
Much loved, which he had built with his own hands,  
And made from them the coffin, his new house.



Three days passed, then the townsfolk came together  
Within the church, heard the familiar words,  
Sang the familiar, sad, consoling hymns,  
And each in their own way gave voice to praise  
Their fellow who had gone away from them.  
The earth was frozen, burial must wait  
Until the long-anticipated thaw.  
They ate a somber funeral meal, raised toasts,  
And offered such poor comfort as they could.  
When they came out to go back to their homes,  
The sun was shining, sparkles lit the snow,  
The sky above was that breathtaking blue  
That sometimes breaks the endless winter gray  
And startles one to seeing the world anew.  
When she came from the church, deep in her grief,  
Young Dora saw and gasped, and grasped the hand  
Of her dear husband with a fearful force,  
For she'd forgotten that the sun could shine,  
That this indifferent world keeps rolling on,  
And that the seasons march on ceaselessly.  
The husband, shocked by her so sudden grip,  
Said, "What's the matter, Dora love?" She hissed,  
"What day is it?" And desperately again,  
"What day is this? How many do we have?  
How many days have we already lost?"  
He stared with horror while the townsfolk watched.  
He hushed her, led her off along the road  
Away towards home until they were alone.  
"The winter's end is still far off," he said  
In calming tones, and pulled her close to him.  
"We still have many days together, dear."  
"You're lying," she said, her voice as cold as air.  
He shouted, "No! I'm not. Look at the snow,  
It isn't melting. That bright sun's still cold."



The snow will stay, the cold won't loose its grip,  
No, not for many weeks." "You're lying still,"  
She said more sullenly. "I feel it come.  
I feel the spring is coming, loathsome spring  
That brings us life but takes you off from me."  
"Dora!" he cried, but she said nothing more,  
And they walked silent all the way back home.

From that day every day passed rapidly,  
More rapidly with every passing day.  
Without another word of what they feared,  
The man and wife each solitary saw  
The rising of the sun come earlier.  
They madly tried to hold each fleeting hour,  
And watched them flow like sand from hands  
gone numb.

They neither dared to speak of what drew near.  
They fearfully observed that each night's fall  
Fell later in the day, and in the night,  
They madly held each other and made love  
As if the world itself would stop for them,  
And then exhausted fell to dreamless sleep.

Her friends could never understand this change  
In Dora, how her brightness had been dimmed,  
How sorrow seemed to fill her, darken her.  
They thought she mourned too long her  
father's death.

"It was a blessing for the poor man, yes,"  
Said Martha. "After so long suffering.  
To hold your grief so dear's unnatural."  
Betina said, "Of course you're right. I don't  
Expect our Dora could move on too soon,  
We know how close she and her father were,  
But still, one can take anything too far.  
Her father would not want to see her so."



“It isn’t for her father’s death she grieves,”  
Said Widow Quiligos. “A secret worm  
Has hid itself in her, not just in her,  
But in her husband, too. That poor young man  
Seems anxious, and more anxious every day.  
Have you not noticed?” And the others nodded.  
Betina said, “He seems distressed, it’s true.”  
And Martha said, “I’ve noticed that myself.  
He’s getting rather... thin.” Betina said,  
“I wonder if there’s money trouble there?”  
“Or something in his past, eh?” Martha said.  
The Widow shook her head. “Perhaps we’re wrong.  
Perhaps they only work themselves too hard,  
Preparing for his leaving for the mountain.”  
“But, oh!” Betina cried, “He can’t go now!  
He can’t leave Dora all alone at home!”  
“I won’t believe it,” Martha said, “I won’t!  
He couldn’t be so cruel!” The Widow said,  
“His family—” “His family my foot!”  
Cried Martha. “And a wife means nothing then?”  
“His duty is his duty. Family—”  
“I know, I know,” Betina said. “He owes  
His family his duty, but it’s clear  
A husband has a duty to his wife!”  
“Oh, girls,” sighed Widow Quiligos, “sometimes  
Our duty’s not so plain as we would wish.  
Too often duties come fast and collide,  
And one must make a choice that’s wrong  
both ways.”  
Betina said, “I think it’s plain as day  
What he should do now Dora is alone.”  
The Widow Quiligos smiled and replied,  
“Well, I remember times when I too thought  
That others’ troubles were quite simply solved.”



When one stands far off, troubles seem so small,  
But closer to... ” She wisely shook her head.  
The two young wives exchanged a secret glance,  
A hidden smile, and turned to other things.

The days grew longer, and those longer days,  
Which long ago had brought her so much joy,  
Now frightened Dora, who, because of fear,  
Grew sullen, irritable, fretted, fussed,  
Attacked her husband with complaints and whines  
That poisoned every precious passing hour..  
She only dropped her anger and her fear  
At night, when they made love, and then she loved  
Frenetically, ferociously, as one  
Who snatches some loved thing out of a flame.  
But when the dawn came, when she first awoke,  
The fear again crashed down upon her breast,  
Reached in with claws steel-like and merciless  
And clutched her heart with sneering cruelty.  
It would not let her, even for a blink,  
Forget the rapid coming of the spring.

An unexpected snow storm filled the valley,  
And killed the buds on the too-eager trees.  
But Dora did not curse the ruined crops  
Of plums and apples. She was overjoyed  
That winter thus refused to be set by.  
Her happiness brought happiness to him  
Who loved her, and for three full days they lived  
Their love as they had lived it, without fear.

That snow storm was deceiving treachery.  
The sun returned, smug, mocking, resolute.  
It warmed the waiting, eager, hungry earth.  
It melted snow and turned the roads to mud.  
Then Dora plunged from joy to dark despair,  
Despair more deep than that she'd known before,



And she dragged down with her to those grim depths  
Her husband, anguished, aching, and distressed,  
Till finally, when she cursed the setting sun,  
He cried out, "Dora! Dora, oh my love!  
Don't do this! Don't make these last days with you  
A horror for me, and regret for you!  
You know I have to go away, and soon,  
In just a few days, for the world will turn  
And winter, like all other things, must pass.  
Don't make a desert of these, our last days.  
Oh, my dear love, we should make from these days  
A store of so much joy that it will keep  
Us satisfied for all the days I'm gone."  
She cried, unthinking, "Yes, when you are gone  
And I am left forever all alone!"

Then, horrified, she slapped her trembling hands  
Across her mouth to stop the hateful words.  
She stared at him, then, shamed, she dropped  
her head.

"I'm sorry," she said softly. "Dearest man,  
Forgive me. I'm so weak. So tired and weak."  
He took her in his arms and pressed her close.  
"No, dear, don't ever beg me to forgive.  
I only want to be with you, I want  
So much to stay, but it's not possible,  
I'd..." He stopped his own words by kissing her.  
More desperately he pleaded, "Kiss me now!  
Kiss me so that I cannot go away,  
Chain me with kisses now to hold me here,  
Keep me here with you, though it means my death!"

Shocked, Dora pushed herself out of his arms.  
She looked at him with face as terror-pale  
As his own. Then she tried to speak, but stopped.  
She could not look into his eyes. She said,





“I’m selfish. I’m ashamed to be so weak.  
You have your duty. You will go away.  
I’ll stay here and I’ll wait for you, of course.  
I knew how it would be, know how it is.  
I’ll manage somehow. Many women have  
A husband who is often far away,  
Or have been left, or widowed, or... but I  
Am lucky. You’re alive, and you love me,  
And I know that you will come back to me.”  
Relieved, the husband said, “You know I will.  
Already I’ve arranged with two young men  
From town that they will work the farm for you,  
You’ll only have to manage them at times.  
Why, you will have more time to be with friends,  
Those friends who love you so and whom you love.  
You’ll see, you won’t be much alone. But I...”  
Now she jumped close to him and clutched at him,  
And kissed his sad face. “Oh, my dearest man,”  
She murmured, “take me with you to the mountain!  
Yes, carry me away to your own land!  
I’ll go with you, we’ll make a new home there,  
In your own place, among your people, who  
Will be my own, to fill the loss I’ve had.  
They need your help? They’ll have my help as well!  
I’ll work for them as I worked for my father,  
I’ll gladly work, I’ll revel in that work,  
For I’ll be working with you at your side,  
We’ll be together, and I’ll be so happy!  
I should be with you, for your duty’s mine,  
A wife and husband ought to work as one.  
There’s nothing for me here, not any more!  
I’ll love your land, however cold it is,  
Because I’ll be with you. I’ll love each chill,  
Each shiver, if it means you’ll hold me tight!



I hate this valley and its greenness now!  
I hate this farm, I even hate the friends  
Who try to comfort me with their pretending!  
I'll go with you, you'll take me with you, we  
Will never be apart again, we won't!"

Her husband watched her, horror in his eyes.  
He shouted, "No! No! No! Impossible!"  
She stepped back, stunned, for she had never heard  
An angry word come from his loving lips.  
But his rage quickly crumbled into anguish,  
As snowflakes melt upon a burning stove.  
He said more calmly, more resigned, "I can't.  
I cannot take you. It's impossible.  
You never would survive the going there,  
You never could survive there, not one day."  
"But you—" she whispered. "No," he firmly said.  
"You will stay here, you will stay safely here  
In this familiar, beautiful old house,  
In your familiar town, with all your friends,  
Through your familiar seasons that pass by.  
By knowing you are safe here, I'll be safe.  
If I cannot know that, how could I live?  
I'll come to you again with the first snow."  
He looked at her. "And that's how it will be."  
He pleaded, "Please do this, just this, for me."

They quietly regarded one another.  
The precious moments passed between them. Then  
She stepped to him, and took his hand, and said,  
"I'll do this for you, and for me." He sobbed.  
"You have your duty," she said, "I have mine."

From then they worked together earnestly  
To fill with good the time that they had left.





## IX

Encouraging cold days followed, but then  
The wind blew to the valley from the south,  
And bore the promising perfume of flowers.  
The husband, who was working in the barn  
Repairing harness, felt the sudden change.  
He dropped the harness with a start, and saw  
The old man smiling at him from the door.  
“Hello, my boy.” “You’ve come.” “As you can see.”  
The young man sighed and gestured to a bench.  
“Well, have a seat.” “Thanks. Don’t mind if I do.”  
They sat beside each other for a while  
Without a word. The young man watched the horse  
That he had bought soon after his return,  
To pull the wagon, or pull Dora’s buggy  
So she could go more comfortably to town.  
The horse looked back at him, and chewed the old,  
Stale hay. Quite soon the meadows would be green,  
He’d have fresh grass to put verve in his step.  
Too soon, the young man thought. But then  
    he asked,  
“Well, how much time is left me in this place?”  
The old man gently said, in quiet tones,  
“No later than tomorrow morning, son.”  
“Ah,” hissed the husband. “Then it comes so soon.”



“For you,” the old man answered. “As for me,  
I put my coming to you off too long.  
The time is short, and danger’s coming fast,  
It’s riding to you on that southern breeze.  
You know it is, you know the risk you take,  
You’ve known it now for days, am I not right?  
And yet you’ve not prepared yourself to leave.  
Oh, maybe you’ve prepared yourself, and her,  
But still you tell yourself not yet, not yet.  
I’m sorry for you, so I didn’t press.  
I didn’t come till now, despite the risk.  
And even now my soft heart will not urge  
That you come now, immediately, with me.  
I’ll give you this one last night with your wife,  
One last and lasting night. A sort of gift  
To you and her, from one too sympathetic.  
You see, I’m really not so cruel, am I?”  
He added with a sigh, “I don’t take pleasure  
In only seeing you to bring you pain,  
Like some old croaking crow that brings bad luck.  
I only do my duty to my boy,  
As you do yours to your young valley wife.  
I only want to save you. You know this.”  
“I know,” the husband said, rose to his feet.  
“There’s chores that must be done before...  
Goodbye.”

The old man stood and eyed him skeptically.  
“You will be gone by dawn, won’t you?” he asked.  
“Yes, yes,” the husband said dismissively.  
“No later?” “No! No later, father.” He  
Picked up the fallen harness from the ground,  
Brushed off the stalks of hay that speckled it,  
Then recommenced the interrupted task.  
Suspicion plain, the old man watched a while,



Then, "Well," he said at last, "goodbye, my boy."  
The young man answered only with a grunt,  
Did not look up. The old man gave a shrug,  
And quickly vanished through the stable door.  
The husband paused. He still did not look up,  
But grunted, kept on working at his chore.

At the same moment he had dropped the strap  
And seen the old man, Dora felt the wind  
Come from the south to bring hope-killing spring.  
She also halted suddenly her work,  
Gasped, dropped the basket that contained the eggs  
She'd gathered in the henhouse. One egg broke.  
But Dora did not do what she most wished:  
She did not run to search out her beloved.  
Instead she picked the basket up again,  
Went back to work, gathered the other eggs.  
She made herself walk calmly to the house.  
She went inside and set the basket down.  
She washed her hands and dried them without haste.  
She almost lazily went to the stove,  
Put on her apron, tied it, took a cloth,  
She lifted up the stewpot lid and sniffed,  
Then took a spoon and tasted testingly.  
She added in some pepper, dashed in salt.  
She filled the coffeepot with fresh, cold water.  
Put in ground coffee, set it on the fire.  
She wiped the table, put out bowls and spoons,  
Took brown bread from the box and sliced it thick.  
She took from out the cold box in the wall  
A pot of fresh-churned butter. All was ready.  
She waited, without breathing, without hope.

The door was opened wide. Despite herself,  
She cried out and jumped up, ran to his arms,  
"I have you! I still have you!" she exclaimed.



Her husband kissed her, but drew down her hands  
From round his neck, looked at her solemnly.

“Beloved Dora, listen to me, dear.

The time has come.” All Dora’s happiness,

So shallow, rootless, crumbled at his words.

She didn’t show this. She matched his resolve.

She said, “When?” He responded, “I must leave

Before the dawn tomorrow.” “So, tomorrow.”

Eternity crept in between them then,

And in that cold eternity she found

The strength to say, “So we have one more night.

That’s hours we still have, many hours to come.

That is a treasure I can keep by me.

I won’t wake up unknowing to you gone.”

She then achieved a smile. “It’s time to eat.”

Much later, when the dark came, came their love.

They started carefully; they cautiously

Advanced, stepped back, invited, offered, probed,

Then wove themselves into rich, colored stuff,

She the firm warp, he the swift plunging weft.

With single-minded earnestness they worked

To halt the course of time, to halt the night,

To stay the coming of the morning sun.

The flow of breathing and its sudden halt.

The softness of a touch, the sudden grasp.

The slick of sweat that gives way to quick chill.

With these they built their yearning barricade

To guard themselves from that which was to come.

For one eternal instant they succeeded,

And finally they rested, did not sleep.

The dawn star rose within a sky too clear.

Dawn tinted red the eastern line of pines.

The new horse in its stable snorted loud.

The husband suddenly leaped from the bed,



Affrighted, saw the menacing dawn light,  
Quick threw his clothes on and called out,  
“Goodbye!”

He hurried to the door, but Dora shrieked,  
And naked, wrapped up only in the quilt,  
She followed him outside into the farmyard.  
Despite herself, despite the vows she’d made,  
Despite her fear, she cried out to him, “Stop!  
Don’t leave me! You won’t leave me here alone!”

The husband desperately spun around.  
He pleaded, “Dora, leave me! Go inside!  
Spring’s coming! Go!” And with those words  
he saw

The old man standing distant on the road,  
Who urged him on to haste with waving hands.

“I have to, Dora!” cried the frantic man.

“I have to, or I’ll die! Oh, Dora, trust me!”

“Then *I*’ll die here, and die alone,” she said.

“Without you I will die.” A raging threat.

“No, Dora!” “I will not live here alone,”

She stated fiercely. “I will not stay here.

I’ll go with you, I will, to your own land,

I’ll go whatever danger there may be.”

She fell upon her knees in the yard’s mud.

“Don’t leave me! Take me with you! Lead me on!

By all that’s holy, husband, take me, too!”

“Impossible!” he said. His panicked eyes

Beheld the swelling of the morning’s glow.

“Impossible! Oh, Dora, trust in me

And let me go!” He dashed into the road.

Severely, she stood from the clinging mud.

With sullen, fervid rage she said, “You go,

You will not listen, you refuse my love.

Then I will follow you.” “You can’t! You’ll die!”



He said, and stepped back toward her. "Then I'll die.  
For what is death to one already dead?  
I'll follow you," said Dora, "even to death."

A scarlet light then blazed across the field.  
The bare edge of the springtime sun appeared  
Above the eastern border of the world.  
The old man ran towards them from the road.  
"Too late! Too late!" he screamed. "Oh, lad,  
too late!"

With sudden calm, the husband dropped his hands.  
"So you have won," he whispered, "and I stay."

Uncomprehending terror seized on Dora.  
She took a bare step forward, then she stopped.

The young man had turned from her and  
now watched  
The rising sun of spring leap into view.  
With eyes astonished he beheld the light,  
The life-inspiring heat of that red orb.  
"You, enemy I never faced till now,"  
He sang to it with mournful veneration.  
"At last I see you, feel you now at last."  
He turned again to Dora, and he smiled.  
"My dearest love, too dearly loved, hear me:  
I am not sorry that I loved you, for  
Your love has been worth everything to me.  
You've killed me. I forgive you, for I know  
You killed me without knowing, by your love.  
Because of that, I even love my death,  
Which is a gift your loving gives to me.  
Oh, Dora!" Now his voice was far away,  
Like echo from the mountain touched by dawn.  
"Remember always that I love you, love you!"

He had grown smaller as the sun rose higher,  
He faded, thinned before her eyes, became





Vague, imprecise, a cloudlike, wavering form  
That shrank and shifted and then fell like fog  
And disappeared, touched by the greedy sun.  
There in the farmyard, nothing, nothing left.  
Between her and the old man, nothing. Nothing.

The old man came to where his boy had been.

“Gone, lad, my boy, my own, gone, as I feared.”  
He raised sad, rheumy, red-rimmed eyes to her.  
“He was of snow,” he said, “but in his breast  
He had a heart too warm to keep him whole.  
He hungered for the life that we’re forbidden  
And always watched your human doings here.”  
Lost, he regarded her naked and lost.

“He saw you from our distant mountain top.  
He begged me, ‘Let me go to her,’ and I,  
A weak old man who cared for him too much,  
And too indulgent, let him do his will.  
Together we built up his human form,  
I did it as a sort of game, but he,  
He worked as if it were some sacred task.  
I thought I might protect him, but I failed,  
And now... that beautiful creation’s lost.  
Lost! My own boy! And would you now still say  
That your love makes all misery worthwhile?”

He listened, but no answer came to him.

The old man took the hat off his white head.  
He swung it to the left and to the right.  
A cold wind bellowed from inside the hat,  
Defying the insistent, killing sun.  
It filigreed the farmyard, windowpanes,  
It blighted the new crocus in the earth,  
It keened and moaned to mortify the ear,  
A mourning plaint to crack the sky itself.  
By this cold river-rush of threnody



The old man was borne off and lost to sight.  
But Dora, stupefied, in shock remained.  
She whispered, "Lost," and then more loudly, "Lost!"  
For now she first began to comprehend,  
Because of what she'd made from desperate need,  
The utter, final horror of this day,  
Of all the days to come throughout her life.  
And then, most horrible, the absolute,  
Eternal unforgivability  
Of that forgiveness he had given her  
From all his loving that had been his death.  
"For ever!" Dora cried out. "Lost forever!"  
She fell into the mud and saw the sun,  
The coming spring. And there behind it came  
The coming summer, and the coming autumn,  
And then the coming, empty, barren winter.  
And thus forever: the unceasing round  
Of hollow season following hollow season,  
Spring, summer, autumn, winter, winter, winter.  
For now each season would be only winter,  
Unceasing winter, empty, loveless winter  
For her now winter, and forever, winter.



